

**WRITING THE FRAGMENTS:  
WILLIAM JAMES AND COMPOSITION IN AN AGE OF (DIS)CONNECTION**

by

Matthew Overstreet

BGS, University of Kansas, 2002

MA, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2012

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
The Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2018

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Matthew Overstreet

It was defended on

January 10, 2018

and approved by

Nancy Glazener, PhD, Professor of English

Paul Kameen, PhD, Professor of English

John Lyne, PhD, Professor of Communications

Dissertation Advisor: David Bartholomae, PhD,

Professor of English and Charles Crow Chair

Copyright © by Matthew Overstreet

2018

**WRITING THE FRAGMENTS:  
WILLIAM JAMES AND COMPOSITION IN AN AGE OF (DIS)CONNECTION**

Matthew Overstreet, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2018

This dissertation seeks to reimagine writing instruction in light of Trump, Brexit, and “fake news.” I argue that neoliberal economic trends, along with the rise of digital media technology, have led to a general inability to engage productively with difference. Inspired by the work of American scientist and philosopher William James (1842-1910), I formulate a writing pedagogy to challenge this state of affairs. Drawing on biological principles, this pedagogy foregrounds the always limited, always interested nature of perception. It makes real the world’s innate plurality and moves students to account for this experience. The goal is to enhance students’ meaning making ability, allowing for more generous modes of thought and being. In the fall of 2016, I put a Jamesian writing pedagogy into practice in a first-year writing course at the University of Pittsburgh. I reference my experience in this course, and the student writing generated, throughout my discussion.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
-------------------	---

### HEGEMONY OF THE FRAGMENTS

1.1	WHAT'S THE POINT? .....	6
1.2	LIFE AMONG THE FRAGMENTS .....	8
1.3	INFORMATION CHAOS .....	9
1.4	FILTER BUBBLES & YOU-LOOPS.....	14
1.5	RISE OF THE NEO-TRIBES .....	18
1.6	COMPOSITION & THE FRAGMENTS (A CASE OF MISDIRECTION).....	21
1.7	ENTER WILLIAM JAMES.....	25
1.8	WILLIAM JAMES AMONG THE FRAGMENTS.....	29

### TOWARDS A JAMESIAN THEORY OF DISCOURSE

2.1	THE WATERS OF THE METAPHYSICAL.....	33
2.2	COMPOSITION'S (TACIT) JAMESIAN TRADITION .....	35
2.3	THE REHABILITATION OF JAMES BERLIN.....	39
2.4	NEW MATERIALISM / POSTCOMPOSITION .....	41

2.5	WRITING AS A WAY OF BEING .....	46
2.6	RADICAL EMPIRICISM .....	50
2.7	TOWARDS A JAMESIAN THEORY OF DISCOURSE.....	53

## COMPOSITION AS ETHICAL ENTERPRISE

3.1	COMPOSITIONIST AS CLERIC.....	59
3.2	FINDING THE RIGHT NAME FOR THE CASE .....	62
3.3	DIFFERENCE & ITS DISCONTENTS.....	65
3.4	ETHICS AS A MODE OF QUESTIONING.....	70
3.5	A POST-CRITICAL COMPOSITION? .....	73
3.6	EMBRACING THE EXCESS: COMPOSITION'S ETHICS OF ATTUNEMENT .....	77
3.7	ON A CERTAIN BLINDNESS IN HUMAN BEINGS .....	79
3.8	ACTUALIZING THE EXCESS.....	83

## IDENTITY

4.1	"I DON'T GET ANY MONEY OUT OF IT" .....	90
4.2	WILLIAM JAMES & THE ART OF SELF-CREATION .....	93
4.3	POSTCOLONIAL BLUES .....	96
4.4	THE INTERSECTIONAL IMPULSE .....	101
4.5	THE EXCESSIVE SELF V. THE GENERIC SELF .....	105
4.6	A NEW NEW MATERIALISM.....	108
4.7	A JAMESIAN THEORY OF IDENTITY.....	113

## **WRITING THE FRAGMENTS**

<b>5.1</b>	<b>THE RHETORIC OF THE FRAGMENTS.....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>TO KNOW A GOOD PERSON WHEN YOU SEE THEM.....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>5.3</b>	<b>COMPOSITION AS LIBERAL EDUCATION .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>5.4</b>	<b>FORMS OF INTELLECTUAL &amp; ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>5.5</b>	<b>THE HUMANIST HOPE.....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>5.6</b>	<b>WILLIAM JAMES IN FYC .....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>5.7</b>	<b>WRITING THE FRAGMENTS (IN THEORY) .....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>5.8</b>	<b>WRITING THE FRAGMENTS (IN PRACTICE).....</b>	<b>145</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>153</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure 1. Fragmented Tweet</u> .....	13
---	----



Frequent Abbreviations & Rough Chronology:

PP for *Principles of Psychology*,

BC for *Psychology, Briefer Course*;

TT for *Talks to Teachers*;

P for *Pragmatism*;

RE for *Essays in Radical Empiricism*;

PU for *A Pluralistic Universe*;

SP for *Some Problems in Philosophy*;

and

MS for *Memories and Studies*.

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the  
origin of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are  
millions of suns left,)  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor  
look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the  
spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things  
from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

-- Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

## INTRODUCTION

As fate would have it, I began this project on Wednesday, November 9, 2016—the day after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. That afternoon, I went to a staff meeting at the university where I work. There were twenty or so teachers of writing, gathered around a conference table in an ornate conference room. Outside and far below, the faint sound of bull-horned speech marked an impromptu student protest. The feeling of defeat, despair, fear even, was palpable. Some of my colleagues had obviously been crying. And at one point, as we were discussing revision techniques, my friend Dan sighed and put his head on the table. “Sorry,” he said, “the election.”

For many Americans—particularly the urban and educated—the rise of Donald Trump was a traumatic event. Of particular note is how surprising Trump’s victory was. Despite polls showing a tight race—largely within the margin of error—in the days leading up to the election, many (if not most) mainstream commentators refused to entertain the possibility of a Trump presidency. Sean Trende has labeled this an example of “interpretive failure,” driven by “unthinkability bias.” Simply put, for a wide segment of the population, a Trump presidency was unimaginable. For many writing teachers, for example, Trump and his campaign represented a repudiation of their core values—logic, reason, honesty, inclusion. The possibility that he might succeed, therefore, seemed remote. Look at his orange skin, his nonsensical claims, we thought, *he’s a clown*. Unfortunately, a large segment of the US electorate saw the same images, heard the same words, but reached a different conclusion.

I start with the election of Donald Trump not because I think the event in itself is of monumental import (indeed, by the time you read these words, Trump may have already been forgotten). Instead, I start here because I believe that the story of this man—and our radically differing perceptions of him—neatly captures the tenor of the times. Simply put, Western society, as of the second decade of the twenty-first century, is marked first and foremost by the circulation (and often head-on collision) of multiple realities. I use the term “realities” here to indicate that it is not that opponents and supporters of

Trump merely disagree. Instead, these groups perceive the world in fundamentally different ways. Where we see clown, they see change agent (with “see” meant to represent the entire embodied, emotionally charged, socially mediated experience of coming to know an object or event). Of course, gaps in perception exist in any human population; ours is a “pluralistic universe,” after all. My claim, as will be made clear in the following pages, is that due to certain economic and technological factors trends these gaps have grown dangerously large and dangerously sedimented. Now, more than ever, it is easier for subjects to band together, create and sustain bespoke realities. At the same time, it is more difficult for groups, once formed, to merge realities, to communicate, and thus to cooperate. We and They are increasingly alien entities. This state of (dis)connection defines our lifeworld.

I don’t need to look very far to find evidence of divergent perception. In the United States, right now, survey data shows unprecedented levels of political polarization. Racial tension, legislative paralysis, and talk of “fake news” (true to some, of course) dominate the headlines. Shared problems such as climate change and gun violence go unresolved, while both popular and academic sources bemoan the degraded state of public discourse. This is social fragmentation. My argument is that the process of fragmentation is sustained by the same dynamic that made it so hard for liberal elites to imagine a Trump presidency. We can call it a failure of empathy, or imagination, or understanding. Whatever the name, it manifests as an inability to productively engage and come to terms with alien realities. We can’t stand, much less understand the other. As a result, mutual growth, and thus the possibility of cooperation, is foreclosed.

In the following pages I argue that composition theory can and should oppose the parochial tendencies of a society in fragments. This claim is rooted in my belief that writing instruction is important—a powerful social force—and that with our institutional strength and long history of productive pluralism, we are well-positioned to intervene. I propose a specific sort of intervention. In the tradition of classic progressive pedagogies (John Dewey), and more recent critical pedagogies (Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor), my project is overtly ideological, even moralistic. The intervention I propose doesn’t involve feeding students a certain story, though. It doesn’t involve trying to persuade them, in any direct way, of the importance of “democracy” or “unity” or even civic deliberation. Instead, it attempts to use writing instruction to fundamentally restructure how people experience the world. It attempts to help them become a little less fearful, a little more open, and therefore, smarter and more creative. I speak in terms of “restructuring of experience” to capture the holistic nature of the change I seek. In my class, we may not talk about Donald Trump. If I’m right though—and if my spirit-guide, William James, is right—when students leave my classroom, they see Trump (and his supporters and opponents) a little differently. They’ll notice certain subtleties, certain particulars that once went unnoticed. And like a cat working her claws against a scratching post, engagement with these newfound

textures will feel good, productive, healthy in some inarticulable way. Whatever their political views (which I honestly care nothing about) my students will be changed, and changed for the better.

Now, I recognize the boldness of my project. I think though that boldness is part of its charm. As will become apparent, apart from a few ideas about how to engage perception and its vagaries, the following pages have little to offer in the way of teaching tips. Instead, what they seek to do is reframe—and thus revitalize—much of what we already do. This revitalization, rejustification even, is of supreme importance, I believe. At its base, writing instruction is about intellectual engagement between a skilled practitioner (the teacher) and a relative novice (the student). The student writes, gets feedback, rewrites and rethinks. Whether teaching Haitian refugees or “Harvard men,” in theory, writing pedagogy really is that simple. For the process to work though, the parties must be engaged. The student must have an investment in what she writes and the teacher must have an investment in the student. More than anything else, this project is an attempt to explain why I’m invested in my students. My hope is that by providing a new argument as to why writing instruction is important, I can relieve some of the hopelessness I felt in that conference room on the ninth of November. I can give my colleagues a reason to be excited for class, excited even for another stack of student essays. Jacques Barzun writes that every thinker is “by nature an absolutist and imperialist.” The habits of democracy, including the ability to engage productively with difference, “must be taught in the teeth of this simple animal faith” (122). Yes. And I believe that the university writing classroom is exactly the right place to wage this battle.

The following study proceeds thusly:

In chapter one, I chart the cognitive-discursive terrain on which writers currently tread. My primary claim is that with neoliberalism, and the accompanying rise of digital media technology, *intra-group* bonds have intensified; at the same time, *inter-group* bonds have frayed. Whether talking in terms of political parties, neighborhoods or families, in-group interactions are now more frequent and intense than ever before. As scholars like Cass Sunstein have shown, this makes for homogeneity of being and radicalization of thought. Correspondingly, communication between groups becomes increasingly difficult. The result is a vicious cycle of social fragmentation, and because exposure to difference is necessary for growth, cognitive ossification. I call this process the *hegemony of the fragments*.

I believe that resistance to the hegemony of the fragments can give writing teachers renewed purpose. To stage such resistance, though, we need a new set of theoretical tools. William James provides these tools, along with a provocative model of how to write, teach and live. James worked in an age fragmented by Darwin and civil war, making his thought particularly relevant to our fractured times. His ideas about the real, true and good are specifically designed to help humans break down barriers, to think and feel and be more. At the present moment, I argue, this is exactly the sort of help we need.

In chapter two, I start at the very bottom, so to speak, discussing how James's metaphysical scheme—termed radical empiricism—can help us rethink the relationship between word and world. Here, and throughout this project, I emphasize the *material* aspect of James thought, thus putting him in conversation with rhetoric and composition's recent new materialist movement. Like new materialism, James's thought is holistic and relational; it dissolves dualisms. Unlike new materialism though, James firmly emphasizes the world-making power of individuated, thinking-feeling humans. Working out of the natural sciences, he situates the individual within an overwhelming flux of sensory inputs. Here, all understanding is partial and all forms of connection possible. But it is up to world-making agents to actualize this possibility.

I argue that James's metaphysics can productively inform how we think about writing. It posits a great intimacy of being, but promises nothing. In turn, it encourages us to keep looking, listening and revising. Writing in such a world is the making of meaning, the active *creation* of connection, with its result (thought and story) just as real as physical fact. Writing reshapes experience. Writing instruction, in turn, must be understood as a powerful material force. Among other practical consequences, such a view encourages us to move writing pedagogy off the page, demanding that in addition to texts and tools, we actively engage perception.

In chapter three, I explore the ethical impulse at the core of James's thought. Drawing on his moral philosophy, as well as his wonderfully literary essay "On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings," I argue that James displays an *ethics of attunement*. This is a critical, constructive habit of mind which attends closely to context in order to name and rename the world. To constantly rename requires cognitive flexibility and a certain degree of daring. We must refuse to abide by any limit or form, and instead strive to feel the unfelt, to think the unthought. We must privilege *growth*.

I argue that James's emphasis on growth can provide an ethical touchstone for rhetoric and composition. Writing teachers can best encourage growth, I suggest, by encouraging attention to the interface between self and world, to both our thoughts and the things about which we think. Such a view combines the postmodern tradition of self-reflection and critique (what I call "negative attunement") with a strong material element. It holds that *sensation disrupts form*. To show what a pedagogy of attunement might look like in practice, at the end of the chapter I turn to my own classroom. I discuss an exercise in which my students were asked to "become an animal." By drawing attention to the tools by which we make sense of the world, I argue, such an exercise can help disrupt the hegemony of the fragments.

In chapter four I present a Jamesian theory of identity. How do we conceive of our selves and those selves we interact with in the classroom? In line with recent intersectional thought, particularly as expressed in queer theory, James values the messiness of lived experience over conceptual reduction. When we think in terms of big rather than small, abstract rather than concrete, he believes, we limit

intimacy and thus restrict growth. I argue that many recent discussions of identity in our field are guilty of this sort of distancing. Other popular (new materialist) theories dissolve the individuated self in a web of relations. Both approaches, I argue, limit writing instruction's transformative potential.

A Jamesian theory of identity recognizes the influence of systems and structures, but also values the inscrutable power of the individuated self. The self for James is an open system. But it's also most definitely a "self"—embodied and individuated, capable of autonomy, self-direction and absolutely original creation. Such a conception, I argue, when applied to teacher and student, opens up new relational possibilities. It allows for novelty on the page and empathy in the classroom. To show the practical benefit of such thought—as well as to model the sort of thought and writing a Jamesian approach demands—I depict a series of encounters with one of my students. In other words, I make my self visible on the page. I thus challenge the effacement of self which often marks new materialist theory.

In the final chapter, the above theoretical strains are brought together in the service of a Jamesian writing pedagogy. Drawing on his educational theory in *Talks to Teachers* and "Social Value of the College Bred," I argue that education, for James, is a full-bodied process centered around the organization of habit. I connect James—a longtime Harvard professor—with the tradition of liberal education described by fellow Harvard pragmatist William Perry. At its core, I argue, liberal education in this mode is about bringing young people into a *controlled encounter with difference*. Through this process, students develop a new relationship with thought and language.

In a Jamesian writing class, I suggest, students are moved to confront and come to terms with the object and the other. Through reading and writing, as well as embodied activities, they are encouraged to make connections, to synthesize various perspectives and data points. The goal is to increase their meaning-making ability and thus their ability to account for difference. In the fall of 2016, I designed and taught a freshman writing course based on these principles. I close by discussing this course and the student writing produced within. My ultimate goal here, as throughout this project, is to show that a Jamesian writing pedagogy can both challenge the hegemony of the fragments and help students become better writers. It can thus (re)vitalize writing instruction.

## 1. HEGEMONY OF THE FRAGMENTS

### 1.1 WHAT'S THE POINT?

The internet is a sewer. The world is getting hotter. And the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. Meanwhile, in the writing classroom, we help young people draft thesis statements and properly cite sources. Even the most committed writing teacher might be moved to ask, what's the point? If Florida is going to be underwater soon, if students just want unlimited broadband and jobs in finance, does writing instruction even matter? I mean, does it *really matter*, more than say, selling cars or stocking vending machines? I think it does. In this chapter, I try to show why.

My primary claim is that economic and technological trends have resulted in a state of affairs I term the *hegemony of the fragments*. With a shift towards more personal control and “choice,” our lifeworlds have become increasingly atomistic. Our cognitive practices have, in turn, ossified. The consequences: an inability to think the unthought, to recognize and come to terms with the desire of the other, to communicate or cooperate. This process of fragmentation and ossification, I argue, defines the world in which we live and work, and underlies many of today's most pressing social problems (the inability of government to address those rising sea levels, for example). And rhetoric and composition is uniquely well placed to respond. We possess the tools and intuitional leverage to help dissolve the fragments. But to do so we need guidance. I argue that we can find guidance in the figure of philosopher William James. James, Richard Gale writes, is a “veritable experience junkie,” who made it his life's mission to help others realize “the full range of feelings, thoughts, and emotions” of which they are capable (3). This sort of radical openness is exactly what is needed in our age of rigid, solipsistic thought.



A shot of William James, I'll argue, can energize both writing instruction and composition as an enterprise.

A word about methodology. The above argument, and indeed the whole of this project, is based on a certain set of assumptions. Let's make these explicit. First, in the following pages you'll find a lot of big ideas. You won't find, though, any reference to double-blind research studies or MRI scans. There's also very little mention of historical data—archival research, for example. What's my proof, then? How can we be sure that we are living in a fragmented age, that we truly are (dis)connected? In response, I'd suggest that I simply tell a story. Does my tale work for you? Does it (or parts of it) resonant with what you see and think and feel? If so, that's my proof.

Relatedly, I must make clear that while I endeavor to speak to all writing teachers, I do not speak for any writing teacher. Nothing William James has to say can be translated into some sort of Platonic ideal of a lesson plan. His work can be used to inform teaching practices, of course, but this application must be recognized as an interested, situated process. The reader-teacher must be an active agent. I, for example, am a white, middle-aged, American male. I teach a mandatory first-year writing course at a large, fairly selective public university. My students are, for the most part, members of the American middle-class and the global upper-middle class. They are engineering and nursing and economics majors, and enroll in my course not out of any great love for the written word, or even to "improve their writing skills," but simply because they have to. Any solutions or strategies I propose are proposed with this teaching body, and this student body, in mind. Other teachers, in other contexts, will read me, read James, and draft other solutions, other strategies. Yes. This is how it must be.

The above caveats are important, because one of the key assumptions driving a Jamesian vision of the educational enterprise is the idea that instruction must always be contextual: it must serve the needs of a specific time, a specific place. It follows that to understand what these needs are, we must carefully chart the discursive and cognitive terrain on which we and our students tread. We must look and listen. This is a fact that I feel often gets lost in "theoretical" discussions. And its recognition translates into the method on display in the following pages. A deep contextualization, an exploration of our shared lifeworld: that, in short, is the purpose of this chapter.

## 1.2 LIFE AMONG THE FRAGMENTS

Humans are tool using beings. As such, we must pay great attention to our technological milieu: Facebook and Twitter, mobile phones and broadband internet. Empirical evidence indicates that digital communication technologies, while providing for more frequent and intense forms of connection *among* groups, have exacerbated the gaps *between* groups. I argue that the tendency to engage same-to-same is self-perpetuating: safe among our preferences, it becomes harder to make sense of the non-preferred. As a result, group-think reigns; the partisan takes precedent over the public. We can call this state of being “neo-tribalism.” I believe it is a destructive force and something rhetoric and composition should oppose. That said, before we discuss the role digital technology plays in the hegemony of the fragments / the formation of neo-tribes, it’s necessary to take a step back and examine the larger political-economic framework out of which these technologies emerge.

Michel Foucault’s epoch-defining lectures on neo-liberal governmentality provide an apt starting point. According to Foucault, during the 1970s there was an fundamental shift in the way power is exercised in Western society (see Lemke). On an economic level, this break was marked by the move from a liberal (specifically Keynesian) welfare-state model of organization to a neoliberal, post-Fordist system. For our purposes, what’s most important is the way in which subjectivity is now constructed. At the most basic level, neoliberalism involves the application of market principles (free trade, open competition) to every aspect of human existence. Under such a regime, the individual economic actor is paramount and the greatest good is thought to be achieved by restricting that actor’s range of self-construction as little as possible. The underlying idea is that individual actors, free from government control, will be best able to recognize and exploit local profit-making opportunities. The role of government, in turn, should be to stand back and not “govern too much” (see Lotier 2017). This means that individual subjectivity is no longer structurally determined. Instead of trying to enforce conformity, the powers that be allow (and even celebrate) the new, the different.

From the defunding of public universities, to the widespread acceptance of gay rights, neoliberalism frames our every move. It allows for new opportunities, for sure, but also saddles us with new responsibilities. Whereas once cognitive and experiential limits were determined by our place within the social structure, individual choice and “personal responsibility” are now paramount. We are now told that we must choose not only what shoes we wear and what car we drive, but also what god we worship, and what we think and feel. As political scientists Lance Bennett and Jarol Manheim write, in late modern society, individuals must assume responsibility for managing their own “emotional and cognitive realities” (221). For many individuals this process of mandatory self-creation takes place largely outside

traditional determinants such as church, state, and even family. “The individuation of social experience, and the decline of broad social memberships, even at the all-embracing levels of class and church,” Bennett and Manheim write, echoing sociologist Anthony Giddens, is the defining feature of our age (221). This “individuation of social experience” is marked by the decline of institutions of all stripes, from Elks Clubs to bowling leagues (see Putnam). Identity becomes less a function of group membership (“I’m a Catholic”) and more a function of consumption choices (“I’m the guy with Topshop slacks and an Audi Q7”). Difference is encouraged, demanded in fact. One must consume in order to take on a unique identity, to come into being by standing out from the crowd. In short, under neoliberalism, the self is the center of the world, and the differentiation of that self from other selves is a lifelong task. The only forbidden choice, it seems, is not to choose.

The above analysis makes clear why postmodern thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman have referred to neoliberalism as “life in fragments.” The structures that once normalized subjectivity, that provided shared sets of values and reference points, and in turn allowed large groups of people to mobilize to solve problems, have been discredited. Now, mine is not a reactionary tract. Like most people of my age and class, I appreciate choice, consumer or otherwise. I’m glad gender roles are more flexible, that sexual mores are less restrictive, that I can eat sushi or curry in Mexico City at four in the morning. But the radical decentralization of authority that Western society has undergone in the past half-century must not be overlooked. As we’ll see, it provides the basis for how we think now and the problems that those modes of thought bring.

### **1.3 INFORMATION CHAOS**

So we live among the fragments. What of our tools? If the age of the nation-state, decolonization and world war was intimately tied to print, advanced neoliberalism seems best paired with digital technologies. As Patricia Dias notes, mobile computing devices, linked by high-speed internet, are one with “an exacerbated stage of modernity where the relations between agents and structures” are more flexible and fluid (2). Put otherwise, such technologies are emblematic of the cult of choice which we, as neoliberal subjects, are automatically members. Our laptops, tablets and mobile phones, the dominant narrative goes, have freed us from those forces (governments, parents, broadcast networks) which seek to shape what we watch, read, listen to, or restrict who we communicate with or what we communicate

about. What information we consume, and to whom we connect, is now up to us. We have control. In theory, this radical democratization of communication channels should have resulted in a new era of understanding. We now have, after all, the ability to learn anything, talk to almost anyone, anytime. We can commune with the alien, forming new bonds and new more inclusive groupings. But no. Instead, Western society is more polarized, more divided than ever before. In fact, despite the opportunity for unlimited connection, it seems we have entered a new era of *disconnection*. So what happened?

First, a vignette. My sophomore year of college, 1999, my two roommates and I had three TVs in our dorm room. A typical evening we'd play video games on one, watch sports on another and perhaps a movie on the third. We agreed that all this technology—three TVs!—was overkill. Visitors always remarked upon it. We liked the element of excess though; that's why we had three TVs.

Last year I visited my sister, now in college at the same university. She only had one TV. In a familiar scene, she and her two roommates would watch it together. Now though each was also engaged with the glowing screen of a mobile phone, sending texts, tweets and snaps, checking Instagram and Facebook, fact-checking on Wikipedia. Two of the three girls also had laptops out, a gesture towards homework, I assume. They have twice as many screens per person as we had, I remember thinking. And no one thinks anything of it! This was perhaps a banal observation, but for me, seeing my sister and her friends so immersed, and so at home, in the digital flow, made real the massive and rapid change our discursive environment has undergone. It made me realize that I too often watch TV with phone in hand, laptop at my side: triple screening, the kids call it. I believe that this shift in how and in what amounts we consume information has changed the way we relate to the world and to one another. It has made certain ties stronger, but also made our beliefs more homogenous and rigid.

The idea that technology changes how we think is not new. From Plato to Nietzsche, the relationship between our tools and our minds is one of which scholars have long been aware. Perhaps no one speaks more cogently on the subject than Neil Postman. Technological change, Postman reminds us, “is neither additive or subtractive. It is ecological” (18). By this he means that the introduction of a new tool—Nietzsche getting a typewriter, for example—can have an impact far outside that tool's area of operation. This renders the consequences of technological advance wildly unpredictable. Once a new technology is adopted, “it plays out its hand,” sparking systemwide change, both positive and negative, foreseen and unforeseen (Postman 7).

Postman also notes the extent to which technology shapes our cognitive practices. Technological advances, he writes, “alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like” (12). With the adoption of writing, or the typewriter, or the smartphone, we don't just do the same thing in new ways. Instead, the introduction of a new tool or technique reverberates throughout our lifeworld, remaking, at least to some degree, our interests, values, habits and symbols—

both what we think about and what we think with. Simply put, technology restructures reality. This means that close attention must be paid to the consequences of our constructions. Especially, I'm sure Postman would add, in times of great technological change.

As my visit with my triple-screening sister made clear, the past few decades have been, by any way we know to measure such things, a time of great technological change. What's the underlying nature of this change though? In the "The Braindead Megaphone," novelist George Saunders probes this question by trying to imagine the difference between his mental life and that of a "guy standing in a field in the year 1200" (1). Both subjects have certain voices in their heads, the residue of conversations with parents, children, neighbors. Both maintain some sort of mental dialogue with the alien: gods, ancestors, historical figures. The key distinction, Saunders determines, is the sheer amount of mediated communication to which he, as a modern, has been exposed. As an inhabitant of the twenty-first century, Saunders's head is full of "people from far away," who have arrived in his mind "via high-tech sources" (2). He lives among an entire category of sounds, images and ideas of which his ancient doppelganger would have had no experience. This is *mediated* information, far-off experience converted into symbols. And with the steady advance of communication technologies—from scrolls, to newspapers, to television, to triple-screening—our world is increasingly awash in it.

Postman was one of the first thinkers to critically examine the consequences of information saturation. As early as 1990, he writes of a world in which information has "become a form of garbage," appearing "in enormous volume and at high speeds, disconnected from theory, meaning or purpose" (70). In a blistering and still timely critique of tech utopianism, he argues that America has become a "techopoly," in which all forms of cultural life have been subjugated "to the sovereignty of technique and technology" (52). Under techopoly, information is granted almost mystical status (see recent discussions of "big data"). In such a world, the production and distribution of information serves no purpose outside itself; more information, Postman writes, is "both the means and end of human creativity" (61).

In his depiction of techopoly, Postman hits upon two points which are key for our purposes. First, he notes the social problems associated with too much information. "When the supply of information is no longer controllable," he writes, "a general breakdown in psychic tranquility and social purpose occurs... people have no way of finding meaning in their experiences, lose their capacity to remember, and have difficulty imagining reasonable futures" (72).

As sea levels rise and civility breaks down, Postman's words feel strikingly prescient. Despite objective measures indicating a state of peace and prosperity, a record number of Americans report that the country is "on the wrong track" and that America has "lost its way." In response, in 2016, the country elected a figure whose campaign rhetoric was defined, first and foremost, by anger and resentment, and whose signature policies—a ban on Muslim immigration, a wall across the southern border as tall as an

hangar—were widely considered impossible (even by many of his own supporters). Has there been a “breakdown in psychic tranquility”? Have we lost the ability to imagine “reasonable futures”? To many educated Americans, on both the right and left, it certainly appears so.

Postman notes a connection between the decline of institutions and “information chaos” (73). Whereas once church, state, family, newspaper editorial board and broadcast network acted as curators of sorts, deciding what information one received, under neoliberalism, these institutions have largely surrendered their regulatory function. Instead, the individual must now regulate his or her own information stream. Once again, we see responsibility delegated to individual agents. We live among ever-increasing torrents of data and must learn to swim.

In *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*, Norwegian cultural critic Thomas Hylland Eriksen probes the growing sense of “information chaos” and the cognitive effects thereof. As he sees it, an ever-increasing volume of mediated information threatens “to fill all the gaps,” leading to a situation in which life becomes a “hysterical series of saturated moments” (3). In such a world, many of the categories and mental traits long-associated with critical thought—“cause and effect, internal organic growth, maturity and experience”—cease to have any value (120). “Coherence and causality slip away,” he writes, leaving “restlessness, flickering gazes and striking one-liners [to] rule the roost” (124). Overall, Eriksen, like Postman, associates information overload with the collapse of traditional forms of meaning making. Under constant discursive bombardment, individuals are unable to make sense of the world outside immediate experience. They can’t tie past to present to future, local to global. They can’t contextualize.

Interestingly, Eriksen, an anthropologist by trade, sees the cognitive practices associated with neoliberalism as a return to an earlier, “pre-modern” form of thought. Instead of “the strict, logical, linear thinking characteristic of industrial society,” he writes, thinking in the information age is “free-associating, poetical, metaphorical” (109). Certainly, anyone who has ever starting out on one Wikipedia page, only to follow a succession of links to a distance one—from “Mia Farrow” to “Dien Bien Phu,” perhaps—can appreciate the seemingly random, “free-associating” nature of digital culture. Of late, some compositionists have even argued that our field should actively cultivate such modes of thought (see Sirc, Boyle).

But there are dangers associated with thought-as-free-verse. With the loss of “narratives, orders, developmental sequences,” it becomes increasingly difficult to locate oneself in space and time (120). This leads to a sort of paralysis, as individuals no longer have stable criteria on which to base action. Integrally though, this state of uncertainty cannot hold. As Postman writes, “cultures must have narratives and will find them where they will.... The alternative is to live without meaning, the ultimate negation of life itself” (173). In short, we need stories. When the world becomes a “hysterical sequence

of saturated moments,” we are drawn to those voices which shout the loudest, present the least taxing narratives. Such a state of affairs, Eriksen argues, provides fertile ground for fundamentalism, opportunism, and “politics devoid of vision” (141). In these post-postmodern scourges, if Eriksen is to be believed, we see digital communication technology—our mobile devices and high-speed broadband—“playing out its hand.” Maybe not. Maybe Eriksen is an alarmist. When I look at my social media feed, though—an unending stream of insults and non sequiturs—his ideas have eerie resonance.

\*\*\*

Taken together, the work of Postman and Eriksen begins to reveal how the fragments created by neoliberalism can turn hegemonic. As the influx of mediated information becomes increasingly intense, complexity, coherence and context are sacrificed. Texts become pastiches of highly abstract, easily digestible soundbites. I’d like to suggest that such texts function almost as a sort of code: they resonant with in-group audiences, but are unintelligible to out-group audiences. In this regard, language itself works to separate us from one another. An educated, urban liberal who tries to read say, Fox News or Brietbart, will likely be flummoxed by the constant, impassioned references to “Benghazi” and “sanctuary cities.” For a rural conservative, on the other hand, these same buzzwords act as self-contained networks of meaning. Integrally, they can be arranged in a seemingly illogical manner (to an outsider), and still accomplish their communicative function. As an example, consider the following tweet from Leigh Cowart, a self-described freelance writer:



**Figure 1.** Fragmented Tweet

As we can see, this communication has been “liked” over 3000 times, indicating that it resonates with its intended audience, reflecting or amplifying some element of their lived experience. It therefore has meaning. On its face though, applying conventional language rules, Cowart’s tweet is incoherent. By starting with “yeah,” the second line seems to agree with the first, though such agreement would render the whole nonsensical. So what’s happening here? I’d like to suggest that Cowart’s tweet works primarily by juxtaposing certain keywords (emotional labor, patriarchal capitalism) with an expletive (dogshit pile). The fact that its two parts don’t seem to cohere doesn’t matter: her audience knows what she’s trying to say.<sup>1</sup>

The above tweet is important because it lays bare the logic at the heart of much modern communication. As Eriksen writes, in a world of excess, “striking one liners”—or in this case, abstract buzzwords—“rule the roost.” This makes perfect sense. Among the digital torrent, every second of attention is precious; communication-by-keyword is therefore a rational strategy. On the whole though, I believe that this movement towards discursive shorthand has a fragmentary effect. Because it presupposes a shared reality to be effective, the sharing of abstract keywords cannot be used to bridge competing realities. If my father, a truck driver from Kansas were to see the above tweet, for example, he would say simply, “what the hell?” Cowart’s important claim about the devaluation of emotional labor would be unintelligible to him. Of course, there’s a time and place for in-group communication. I believe, though, following Postman and Eriksen, that in contemporary discursive space, such communication is increasingly crowding out more complex, resource-intensive messaging. The result is a general loss of communicative capacity. Our narratives are more simple, but paradoxically, can no longer be as widely shared.

## 1.4 FILTER BUBBLES & YOU-LOOPS

In the above section, we saw how information chaos can make it more difficult for individuals to create meaning, to contextualize, to tie one event to another. We also saw how the writing practices such chaos encourages may make it more difficult for groups to communicate. These trends, though in no way

---

<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that Cowart’s tweet presents the first line not as evidence for the second (the expected move), but as a claim to be disputed. This logic is difficult to follow because of the use of “yeah” to start the second line. The fact that it took me three years to figure it out, I feel, only proves my point.



absolute or irreversible, should be of concern to writing teachers. As Ann Berthoff argues, the expansion of meaning-making ability is composition's primary mission. Through the construction of more and more sophisticated meanings our students come to know—and care for—more of our world. My claim is that the current state of information chaos perverts this process. In a world of excess, thinking and speaking are simplified (by necessity). In turn, our ability to know, feel, be and be together is restricted. This contraction of experience is a serious social problem, and one that rhetoric and composition can and should address.

Wait, says the technological utopian. How can you claim experience is contracting? With the death of the censor, group belonging is now open, fluid. Citing online activists groups perhaps, she says that the seeming chaos allows for new and organic forms of connection, hence more expansive (often supra-cognitive) forms of meaning. Yes and no. As has become increasingly apparent, just because we *can* use digital technology to expand who and what we know, does not mean we *will*. Quite the opposite. In fact, I'd like to suggest that with neoliberalism and the cult of choice, *the censor has moved inward* (and thus gained authority). Without external regulation, individuals have had to become more personally selective.<sup>2</sup> The result, on the whole, is a sort of cognitive and aesthetic conservatism.

As evidence of the above, consider your own behavior in a typical low information environment—say an airplane seat at take-off or landing. Unable to access more desirable forms of stimulation, you scan the safety card, flip through the airline magazine. You read advertisements and the message from the airline's CEO—texts you wouldn't even glance at otherwise. In this airline seat, in short, your guard comes down: because of a paucity of information, you become more willing to take chances, to engage new and unknown symbols. For most of human existence, low info was the default. In the digital age, though, we find fewer and fewer low-information sanctuaries. We are always plugged-in and therefore our guard must always be up. We must always be scanning and selecting, trying to determine which bits of mediated information (out of the massive stream) best suit our needs. This makes us relatively less likely to engage with something new or different. Consider a massive all-you-can-eat-buffet: allowed to pick between an array of your favorite dishes, are you going to choose the alien gruel? I think not.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that citizens have somehow become more critical or discerning. A recent report from the Stanford History Education Group, for example, recently found that college students displayed a “dismaying inability” to separate fact from fiction on social media and other digital platforms (see SHEG). The likely cause, I'd argue, is perhaps best termed “willful illiteracy.” Given the ability to construct their own reality, subjects understandably pay little attention to outside standards of fact and fiction. They simply append the label “fact” to those bits of information that support their worldview.

Eriksen, in particular, should be lauded for his early recognition of the role individuals must now play in managing their information exposure. He recognizes that with the decline of institutions, the censor has been internalized—that we must now decide for ourselves what we see and what we ignore. In an information society, Eriksen writes, “protecting oneself” against unwanted information is a “crucial skill” (17). His use of the word “protecting” here is telling. In a world in which meanings are increasingly fragile (and valuable), information which disturbs our vision and views must be treated with extreme caution.

Eriksen also recognizes the dangers of filtering. When “each individual is forced to develop their own paths, creating their own personal cuts in the world,” it becomes increasingly difficult to identify and solve common problems (107). Paradoxically though, he concludes, that ultimately, for our own well-being, “what matters more than anything else... is to equip oneself with sturdy, efficient filters which consist of taste, values, interests and intuition” (149). It seems that Eriksen is arguing for a conception of filtering—of information regulation, of censorship—as a conscious, critical practice. We should be aware of what we are excluding and why we are excluding it. This is undoubtedly good advice. In the years since the publication of *Tyranny of the Moment* though, the media environment has furthered evolved. This evolution has made the filters Eriksen suggests both a standard feature of our lifeworld and hidden them from view.

In *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You*, Eli Pariser, founder of the public interest website Moveon.org, traces the failure of the internet’s democratic possibilities. As a young left-wing activist, he believed that unlimited, uncensored digital connection would usher in a new age of informed citizenship and government accountability. As of 2010, he finds his hopes largely dashed. He blames this failure on what he terms the “filter bubble.” As he explains, personalized filters, driven by complex computer algorithms, have become an integral part of our digital life. Whenever we select a movie on Netflix, check our Facebook feed, or do a Google search, we are not encountering some objective slice of the web. Instead, we are being provided with recommendations specifically tailored to our own interests. The more we use these services, the better they get at predicting what movie we’ll watch, what news article we’ll read, what link we’ll click. The effect of such personalization, Pariser argues, is to “serve up a kind of invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas” (13). Eventually, he writes, you get stuck in a “static, ever narrowing version of yourself—an endless you-loop” (14).

Pariser’s filter bubble represents a fascinating evolution of the social trends discussed so far. As Postman predicts, newer technology will always appear to solve the problems created by newish technology. In this case, innovation led to information chaos; innovation provides a solution to information chaos. The “sturdy, efficient filters” Eriksen calls for are now in place. These filters are

invisible though, mandatory, and as Parser notes, completely solitary: no one is in *my* bubble except for me. In this we see the individuation of experience—the hallmark of neoliberalism—taken to its logical extreme. The construction of our own “emotional and cognitive realities” is now automatic.

Parser does important work in tracing the practical consequences of digital personalization. In line with Postman’s comments about the connection between our tools and our reality, he shows how the filter bubble works to alter what we see, what we feel, and what we value. The filter bubble, he writes, “can act as magnifying glass,” making certain problems or issues loom large in our imagination (48). For other individuals, and other social groups, stuck in mutually exclusive bubbles, other problems and issues rule. Relatedly, the filter bubble makes it more difficult for us to see “the big picture,” to construct inclusive, coherent narratives of explanation. As Parser puts it, in contemporary digital space, “it’s easy to lose your bearings, to believe the world is a narrow island when in fact it’s an immense, varied continent” (61). It’s important to underscore how insidious this process is. In a state of pure information chaos, we are at least aware of our impaired meaning-making ability. If Parser is right, in the rarified world of the filter bubble, we are deprived of even this self-knowledge.

The cognitive blinkering of the filter bubble has important implications for how we think and learn. As Parser puts it, intense personalization can upset the “cognitive balancing act” that allows us to adapt to new stimuli (49). We need “meaning threats”—images or ideas that don’t fit within our existing worldview—in order to spur us to draft more inclusive narratives. The filter bubble blocks such threats. By surrounding us with ideas with which we already agree, personalization “removes from our environment key prompts that make us want to learn,” ultimately making us “overconfident in our mental frameworks” (49). In short, within the filter bubble, we are blind to the other and happy to remain so. Our thoughts become rigid, less able to accommodate the unknown, the alien. Our stories become simplistic. Difference (that shibboleth of neoliberal lore!) becomes the enemy.

As any frequent user of social media can attest, there is something of a vicious circle associated with the process described above. The more and more our views are confirmed—by the news articles we read, by our interactions with similarly situated peers—the more disgusting and illogical opposing views become. As such, when the other, and his grotesque desire manage to sneak through the filtration process, we are quick to push him out of sight. Of course, social media platforms make the removal of disturbing elements as painless as possible. Allowing you to exercise your choice, after all, is essential to keeping you as a customer. In this way, through the “defriending” of a racist uncle on Facebook, for example, we further contribute to our cognitive isolation. Perhaps this helps explain why so many American elites were shocked by Donald Trump’s presidential victory. As a friend of mine put it, Trump voters are the ones we long ago blocked from our Facebook feeds.

## 1.5 RISE OF THE NEO-TRIBES

So far we've mainly discussed the alienating effects of information filtering—its tendency to isolates individuals within “you-loops” of their own design. It's important to remember though that digital tools do in fact allow for a previously unimaginable degree of connectivity. Whether through email, text message, social media, video call or plain old voice call, “staying in touch” is easier now than ever before. As we enter the second decade of widespread mobile phone and internet availability, empirical evidence is starting to emerge about who we connect with, what information we share, and what this does to us. Summarizing her research on the impact of digital connectivity on Japanese culture, Misa Matsuda notes the rise of “selective sociality,” in which people are increasingly able to manage their social networks “according to affinities, maintaining relationships with those they share interests with, regardless of time and place” (qtd. in Dias 5). She finds that this reinforces the homogeneity of our lifeworlds, exacerbating the differences between groups. Vicent Gozalez puts it more colorfully, writing that subjects now live on “digital islands” where they engage in “digital inbreeding,” ignoring issues of common concern, and sparking widespread “cognitive regression” (132). So again, as with Parser, we see concerns that solipsism rules the day. Individuals and self-selected groups of individuals turn inward. The boring, uncomfortable or simply different, are ignored.

The contracting range of social experience is more than just a sociological novelty. Instead, it can have a real impact on our public order system. Perhaps the most important voice on the political effects of social fragmentation is Cass Sunstein. His work on group polarization is especially timely. As Sunstein explains, group polarization is a social phenomenon in which, upon discussion and deliberation, “members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members' predeliberation tendencies” (74). In other words, as similarly situated individuals discuss an issue, their views get both more homogenous and more extreme. Sunstein posits that this shift is due to social influence on behavior (E.G., a desire not to harm's one reputation by taking an unpopular stand) and the disproportionate number of arguments trending to one side. He finds evidence of this tendency among juries, corporate boards and terrorist groups. The power of social sanction is so strong, in fact, that people will even disregard evidence of their own senses (79). Sunstein argues that wars, feuds and racial conflicts can all be explained with reference to group polarization. Overall, he writes, “widespread error and social fragmentation are likely to result when like-minded people, insulated from others, move in extreme directions simply because of limited argument pools and parochial influences” (105).

Sunstein's findings are both startling, and I'm afraid, all too familiar. Many elements of modern life, from the vulgarity of the comments sections of online news sources, to the rabid hatred fans feel for a rival sports team, bear traces of group polarization. In a world of "digital islands," in which it is easier than ever to connect with those, and only those, who share your interests and values, this phenomenon becomes only more pronounced.

Sunstein himself addresses this concern. In *Republic.com 2.0* he discusses the potential harm social fragmentation, particularly of the digital sort, might have on democratic governance. Here he argues that exposure to otherness, and the cultivation of shared experience, "are central to democracy itself" (5). Like Parser, he notes the natural tendency of people to seek out stimuli that don't disturb their existing worldview. According to Sunstein, America's founding fathers, aware of this tendency, took pains to ensure that our constitutionally mandated system of free expression includes both freedom from censorship and a right to access. Common spaces, like streets and parks, are open to all comers. Here, citizens risk exposure to unexpected, even unwanted, ideas. This injects an element of heterogeneity into our lifeworlds, allowing for cognitive growth, and ultimately, better public policy. As individuals gain more control over their social reality though, this key feature of democracy is threatened. Whether online, on niche TV channels, or in their own communities, instead of an array of competing voices, citizens are now confronted only with "more and louder echoes of their own voices" (Sunstein 55).

Violent religious extremists, Sunstein notes, represent perhaps the most vulgar example of digital solipsism. Caught in online echo chambers which reaffirm and reinforce their violent views, these subjects suffer from "a crippled epistemology." Sunstein writes: "They know very little, and what they know comes... from people who appeal to, and amplify, their preexisting inclinations" (76). Here—in the thousands of young Europeans who have rushed to join the radical Islamic State group in recent years, for example—we see the hegemony of the fragments in its grossest manifestation. Such subjects are intensely connected, but in the aggregate, their connection becomes perverse. Terror groups, Sunstein writes, quoting an insider account of such groups, "do not even consider that they may be wrong and that other views may have some merit.... They attribute only evil motives to anyone outside their group.... Compromise is rejected," and driven by their own internal dynamics, they often acts in ways which are "objectively nonproductive or even counterproductive to their announced goal" (74,75). Digital inbreeding, we can say, has completely comprised these subjects' ability to make sense of the world. They are trapped within a simplistic, exclusive and utterly rigid set of narratives.

What is particularly striking is the fact that the above description of group dynamics could also be said to apply to elements of the Republican party or segments of the left-wing "social justice" community. In short, while radical religious groups may be different in *quantity* (of hate, of violent propensity) they are not fundamentally different in *quality* from other neo-tribes. And, I would argue, pointing to gridlock

in Washington DC and activist vitriol on college campuses, that neotribalism is the order of the day. Simply put, to an increasing extent, social associations are coming to be defined by inflexibility of thought and story. This limits their ability to engage productively with other groups. Following Sunstein, we can posit that the fragmentation of social experience, both exemplified in, and sustained by, digital communication technology, has led to this state of (dis)connection.

\*\*\*

Despite the above, I am not a technological determinist. Certainly we can learn to use our tools in less destructive ways. As I hope I've made clear though, communication practices, digital or otherwise, cannot be understood separately from the reigning political-economic order. This complicates any attempt by writing teachers (or anyone else) to combat problematic cognitive and discursive practices. As noted, the tenor of our times is best captured under the admittedly vague, and oft abused, catch-all "neoliberalism." Under this boss, choice rules, whether it be at Burger King, which promises you can "have it your way," or in terms of public policy, which assumes that the greatest good arises from letting people do as they wish (and as their bank accounts allow, of course). Given a base state of information chaos, many people *like* filter bubbles, they *like* soundbites and simple, exclusive narratives. As Marc Lafuente notes, the homogeneity of social networks, by constantly affirming one's views, provides "emotional benefits" (6). Writing teachers are not parents or priests, why should we be tasked with drawing students out their protective bubbles?

Sunstein speaks to such concerns. First, he draws a distinction between consumer sovereignty and political sovereignty. The former, he writes, means that individual consumers are able to choose exactly as they wish. They are able to exercise their desires, with "desire" seen as timeless and given. Political sovereignty, on the other hand, understands desire as a dynamic force. In English-department speak, we would say that it is primarily concerned with the construction of healthy subjectivities. When political sovereignty is privileged, Sunstein argues, freedom is seen to consist "not simply in the satisfaction of whatever preferences people have, but also in the chance to have preferences... formed under decent conditions" (45). Respect for political sovereignty is at the heart of the Western democratic tradition, he claims, drawing a distinction between pure populism and a democratic system that takes steps to ensure deliberation, reflection and accountability. Only under the latter—what he terms "deliberative democracy"—is one truly free.

Sunstein's concept of deliberative democracy provides a foundation on which educators could begin to challenge the reigning consumer-choice model and its associated set of communication practices. Indeed, some educators, influenced by the work of Parser and Sunstein, have already begun to do so. Spanish philosopher of education Vicent Gozalvez, for example, has recently argued for "education and training measures to limit apparently reasonable individual decisions... that could eventually

deteriorate... the freedom of citizens” (132). “It is essential,” he writes, to be aware of the danger of digital inbreeding, “and fight it on the educational front” (133). Towards this end, he argues for educational initiatives which “seek to impart knowledge of broader social realities,” by pushing students to engage in “the constant search for new experiential and mental horizons” (135).

Though he is speaking mainly of education in the schools, Gozálvez’s call can, and should, resonant with teachers of composition. Composition obviously has many goals—to prepare students for college, careers and citizenship, to encourage personal growth and respect for the written word—at heart though, they all implicate the use of tools, whether be it pencil, pen, word processor or simply language itself. As the above has shown, it is becoming increasingly clear that the way we use our tools is restricting what we can think, feel and do. We need theory and pedagogy that opens up new vistas, both for ourselves and our students. Below I will argue that the work of William James can help point the way to these open spaces. The work of Cass Sunstein suggests why we must pursue them. Of course, some may believe that the expansion of our mental and experiential horizons is a sufficient end in itself, the ultimate purpose of being alive even (this is what William James would likely claim). Others may not be so sure. For these teachers, Sunstein’s argument as to the importance of deliberative democracy, and the perils it currently faces, provides an alternative justification for opening things up. Simply put, if Sunstein is right, writing teachers can help ensure the continuation of democratic governance by working to promote cognitive and discursive habits which allow for deliberation, reflection, and ultimately, compromise. I can’t imagine a more important task.

## **1.6 COMPOSITION & THE FRAGMENTS (A CASE OF MISDIRECTION)**

I began this chapter by suggesting that before acting, writing teacher seek to learn the specific needs of the time and place in which they act. Towards this end, I’ve mapped our present cognitive and discursive terrain. Stretching from Neil Postman to Cass Sunstein, from Spain to Silicon Valley, I’ve found a similar thread of concerns. Simply put, writers today confront a world broken into fragments. In light of the rise of digital technology, and the flood of mediated information it has unleashed, coherent, inclusive meanings are difficult to construct. At the same time, we are increasingly insulated from difference. The effect is widespread cognitive ossification. I’ve termed this state of affairs the hegemony of the fragments. It is intimately connected to the formation of neo-tribes, groups of individuals drawn together by shared interests or values, who through the effects of digital

inbreeding and group polarization, find it difficult to find common ground with other groups. Taken together, these factors have resulted in the scene I described at the beginning of this essay: political polarization and paralysis, hatred and division.

I'd like to report that composition theory, the enterprise in which I am engaged, has made strides towards addressing these problems. Unfortunately, I don't believe this to be the case. In fact, I believe that the currently dominant theoretical tendencies within composition scholarship are largely blind to social fragmentation. To explain why this might be, I'd like to turn to a recent journal article: "Around 1986: The Externalization of Cognition and the Emergence of Postprocess Invention," by Kristopher M. Lotier. In this piece, published in the field's flagship journal, Lotier does important work in mapping the current state of composition theory. Specifically, he argues that since the mid-1980s, a postprocess understanding of writing has come to replace the once dominant process model.<sup>3</sup> This claim, in itself, is not new. Lotier's more original contribution is to suggest that rather than just being one approach among many, postprocess represents something of a master key. "Since roughly 1986," he writes, "postprocess has acted as a disciplinary cultural dominant, with its tenets...providing the largely unspoken foundation(s) on which a host of divergent theories arise" (363). And what are these tenets? For present purposes, the most important is the *externalization of cognition*.

According to Lotier, process-era theories of writing and the writer presupposed cognitive internalism, "the idea that one's mind is separate from other minds and from the world in which those minds exist" (362). Externalism challenges this idea, suggesting that no thinking (or writing) can occur sans interaction with various objects and others. Such theories, Lotier writes, suggest that "aloneness is an ontological impossibility.... All writing is always already overwritten by other people and, crucially, other *stuff*" (366). Today's two hottest theoretical approaches—ecological composition and posthuman composition—are intimately related to one another (and subsumed under postprocess) in that both seek to trace the operation of extended cognition (the former by focusing on the writer in her environs; the latter, the writer and her tools).

In noting the dominance of externalist theories of mind, Lotier puts into words what many comp watchers must feel: simply put, that over the past thirty years, there's been an ongoing race to spread the writer as thin as possible. Every act of writing, our theory now holds, is "a plural act... accomplished by an indefinite number of human and nonhuman actors" (373). The job of the composition theorist, it

---

<sup>3</sup> As the title of his piece suggests, Lotier is primarily concerned with theories of invention. I believe his claims also hold true for composition theory as a whole, though.



seems, is primarily to identify overlooked ones.<sup>4</sup> Lotier credits this shift in theoretical orientation to larger social trends. Changes in the “techno-linguistic-intellectual ecology,” he writes, have revealed our inherent connectivity, with digital technologies, “making the idea that writing had ever been individualizable seem... untenable” (364).

So compositionists are increasingly aware of the various forces that impact the writing act. Good. It seems to me though, that in the race to draw new connections, composition theory has overlooked rampant disconnection. As we rush to externalize mind, to describe more and more ways in which our tools and environs *could possibly* think for us and with us, we’ve stopped caring about the ways in which we actually think. Our theorists have become sci-fi novelists. And that explains why composition theory has been silent on the issue of social fragmentation. As I’ve tried to show, the hegemony of the fragments, while tied to abstract political-economic-technical processes, works primarily on the level of individual cognition: it arises from and sustains important changes in the way individual humans construct their world. Composition theorists, meanwhile, have focused mainly on texts, tools, and the possibilities therein. They have drawn ever more broad webs of technological potentiality. This has blinded them to the increasingly restricted nature of *human* life.

Tony Scott and Nancy Welch have recently made a similar accusation. In arguing for a turn to “critical materialism,” they claim that composition theory remains “textually fixated,” thereby overlooking the “bodily impacts” of tools and texts (566). To illustrate their point, they discuss the popular “Kony 2012” online video. This text, despite promoting militaristic and imperialist policy goals, has generally been heralded as a successful example of online “hacktivism.” Scholars marvel at the speed with which the video spread around the internet, the new forms of connection it sparked; they fail to consider, however, the substance of the video’s claims and the bodies those claims impact. In this, Scott and Welch see “a McLuhanesque enthrallment” with the scale or pace of technological change working to discourage “critical engagement with human affairs” (565). I see a similar enthrallment in much of our field’s best theory.

Returning to Lotier’s essay, we can find traces of this misdirection. As noted, Lotier provides a useful survey of the theoretical scene. In a standard composition studies move, he also seeks to tie his work to the classroom. Per postprocess theory, every writing act is singular, therefore universal pedagogical prescriptions cannot be issued; in recognition of this fact, Lotier (correctly) refuses to issue any. Instead, he presents “two promising, contemporary models of invention” which he sees as illustrating the successful application of “theory attuned to its environs” (375). The first is labeled

---

<sup>4</sup> Laura Micciche, for example, theorizes writing as a “merging of various forms of matter—objects, pets, sounds, tools, books, bodies, spaces, feelings, and so on—in an activity not solely dependent on one’s control” (498). Margaret Syverson reminds us not to forget “weather, animals, oceans, mountains, and forests” (9).

“proairetic invention,” and has the goal of leaving “as many options for the text available as possible—both in terms of what it could *mean* and what it could *do*”(376). This is a promising, I thought as I read, anticipating a discussion of what such a strategy might look like in action, what it might do to and for my students, and why I might be interested in sparking this sort of change. Instead though, Lotier spends the rest of the essay discussing tools. New media technologies “further this proairetic openness,” he writes, before discussing in detail how and why this might be the case (376). The student—as in the embodied being expected to interact with blogs, databases and search engines—is never mentioned. The reason for this focus is clear: due to the externalist theories of mind driving postprocess theory, tools and environs are “where the action is.” Within networks and assemblages, that’s where texts collide, mate, merge. To the outside, therefore, is where Lotier turns his attention.

So, in essence, my complaint tracks Scott and Welch’s. We agree that composition theory must foreground the interplay of texts, thought and thing. We feel though that currently dominant materialist approaches—the posthuman and ecological, in particular—devalue the human. They focus too much on texts, tools and abstract notions of circulation rather than the actual bodily effects of life with and among such entities. This results in statements, in presuppositions, even, which seen in light of empirical evidence as to how people actually use digital technology, seem quite naïve. Lotier, for example, writes gushingly of how technology allows any user, “with just a few keystrokes, to connect [a text] to an effectively infinite constellation of other texts” (376). Sure, I’d say, but so what? Our options are hypothetically unlimited, but in the world of actual practice—of thought and feeling and Donald Trump—they grow more limited by the day. As the fragments become more and more hegemonic, Lotier’s “constellation of other texts” becomes a straitjacket. Composition theory, enthralled with connection, has been unable to understand this as a problem or provide possible solutions. As such, composition theory has been complicit in the hegemony of the fragments.

## 1.7 ENTER WILLIAM JAMES

According to the argument sketched above, composition has focused too heavily on texts, tools and the possibilities therein, and not enough on the human limitations that may stop writers from realizing those possibilities. To some extent, this focus is understandable. As Lotier suggests, the past decades have seen great changes in how we write: these changes, and the opportunities they open up, must be explored. At the same time though, for some, this tendency to fetishize gadgets may fit a little too comfortably with the impulses that drive consumer culture. As I read it, Lotier's piece, for example, argues that hyperlinks, databases and search engines can help writers "think different." Of course, this is exactly what Apple, Inc.—the world's most profitable company—has long promised.

In light of the above, this project will argue for a vision of composition theory which is decidedly more human (and perhaps less corporate). To think in this new mode, we need a model. For this role, I nominate William James. As I will detail below, James was an American, brother of Henry, and long-time Harvard professor. A voracious reader and generous thinker, he wrote eloquently on many subjects. To my knowledge though, writing instruction was not one of them. This means that while James can (and should) inform composition theory, the correspondence will not be one-to-one. Instead, as presented here, I intend William James to function as a *character* as Alasdair MacIntyre has defined the term. A character, MacIntyre writes, embodies a set of moral, epistemological and ontological beliefs, thereby furnishing a community with a sort of ideal. In such a figure, personality type and social function fuse. As MacIntyre sees it, Victorian England, for example, was defined by the Public School Master, the Engineer and the Explorer. These figures, as they circulated in discourse, provided landmarks by which Victorians could navigate social existence.

In rhetoric and composition we already have a great deal of characters. Peter Elbow is one. David Bartholomae is another. Recently, attempts have been made to enshrine Bruno Latour (see Lynch and Rivers). In each case, a proper name acts as shorthand for a certain attitude towards writing and the teaching of writing (writing without teachers vs. writing with teachers vs. writing with things, we might say). Of course, no pedagogy is a pure reflection of any of these ideals. And that's fine. The goal in calling forth characters is not doctrinal purity, nor universal assent; instead, it is to focus attention, to provide an object of discussion. In fact, it is only because these figures "provide focal points for disagreement that they are able to perform their defining task" (MacIntyre 31). It is in this vein that I present William James. As we'll see, the personality type performed in his work is one of radical openness. As Jacques Barzun writes, through a lifetime of study and struggle, James "painfully taught himself the principle of total acceptance—not to subordinate or explain away anything but to welcome the

contents of every kind of experience” (21). This heroic willingness to look and listen makes James the embodiment of a certain set of moral and metaphysical assumptions I wish to promote. Simply put, I believe that given our existence among the fragments, James provides an apt model for how writers and writing teachers should strive to write, think and be. Others will feel differently. Either way, by studying how William James, as a character, writes and thinks, we can gain a shared point of reference, and ultimately, I hope, hammer out a better understanding of what composition is and can do.

\*\*\*

By all accounts, William James is an important intellectual figure. John McDermott writes that James’s work “is the vestibule to the thought and values of the twentieth century” (146). Cornel West writes that, with the exception of James’s godfather, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “no one but James deserves to be considered the preeminent American man of letters” (54). Despite his cultural prominence, James has been little mentioned in the composition literature. Before we discuss why this might be, some biographical information is in order. This is important, because, by all accounts, James’s life and thought are thoroughly intertwined, with the latter representing, at bottom, nothing more than an effort to come to terms with the former. His is perhaps the most *personal* of philosophies. As Richard Gale writes, James’s life work “is the soulful expression of someone who has ‘paid his dues,’ someone who, like old wagon wheels, has been through it all” (1). A quick sketch of his journey:

William James was born in 1842 in New York City, the eldest son of Henry James Sr., an independently wealthy and socially prominent (though not doctrinally influential) Swedenborgian theologian.<sup>5</sup> After a peripatetic childhood, and a young adulthood marked by physical and mental breakdowns, in 1869 he received an M.D. from Harvard, his only academic qualification. Though not an exceptional student, he was shortly thereafter appointed instructor of physiology and anatomy. He would teach at Harvard for the next thirty-five years. Marked by a “romantic temperament” which relied on “natural aptitude and intuition rather than... disciplinary training,” his work wandered freely among the physical sciences, philosophy and psychology, a discipline he is credited with helping create (Baldwin 369). In 1890 he published the monumental two-volume textbook, *Principles of Psychology*. His popularly acclaimed *Talks to Teachers* lecture series, in which made his psychological thought available to an audience of school teachers, took place the following year.

In later life, James’s interests turned more towards philosophy. His famous justification for religious faith—*The Will to Believe*—was published in 1897, followed by *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a series of case studies in the mystical. A year later he identified himself as a pragmatist, a term drawn from the work of his college friend, C.S. Peirce. This line of thought would culminate in

---

<sup>5</sup> All dates in this biographic summary are drawn from the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

*Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, published in 1907, after which he began work on his metaphysical scheme, termed “radical empiricism.” He died of heart failure in 1910, leaving much of this work incomplete.<sup>6</sup>

How has James been read? What’s his intellectual legacy? Given James’s many interests, this is a difficult question. In psychology, James’s *Principles* is still a canonical text, though, according to Frank Pajares, the field has never had a “Jamesian tradition” of which to speak (57). In philosophy, James’s pragmatism—the only indigenous American philosophical tradition, according to Cornel West—caused a stir upon its introduction. It’s bold supposition that truth is found in human experience, rather than in the conceptual clouds, was both feted as “a shaft of light thrown into the darkness” and condemned as something akin to heresy (Barzun 87). Since then, interest in the pragmatist creed have waxed and waned.<sup>7</sup> James has always been in the scholarly conscious, though. As a leading cultural figure during one of America’s most formative periods, his thought, Pajares writes, has influenced “politics, sociology, religion and theology, literature, and... even jurisprudence” (56). As an example of this influence, one might cite the ubiquitous phrase “stream of consciousness” (drawn from *Principles*), or the U.S. Supreme Court’s opinion in *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, which in true pragmatist fashion, hinges on the *consequences* of segregation (see Ives).

Earlier I noted the intensely personal nature of James’s thought. No matter the subject, James himself always seems present on the page. This might account for a tendency among readers to develop what can only be described as a deep emotional bond with the man and his work. Psychologist Frank Pajares is representative. “For over 30 years,” he writes, “I have been smitten with William James.... My admiration borders on adulation” (42). This sort of devotion is not limited to academic audiences. Jessa Crispin, a popular essayist, writes that in James, she finds “a friend, a mentor, a professor, and some sort of idealized father.... He makes quiet sense of the world, in all its glories and deprivations, its calamities and its beauties.” Can you imagine such words being written about Kant or Hume or any of James’s other peers in the philosophical pantheon? James is a truth-teller, but also a soothing presence. And, I’d suggest, many of us need to calm down.

---

<sup>6</sup> Apart from his scholarly activities, James was noted for his interest in mediums and other psychic phenomena, as well as his vocal opposition to racial oppression and American imperialism. His life and work influenced numerous students (W.E.B. DuBois, Theodore Roosevelt, Gertrude Stein), the public at large, and philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic (Edmund Husserl, John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein).

<sup>7</sup> Pragmatism is generally understood as going out of fashion with the death of John Dewey in the mid-twentieth century. It was then re-popularized by Richard Rorty in the 1980s. As of 2018, Jamesian pragmatism, in particular, seems to be an object of interest across many academic disciplines.

Given James's standing as one of America's great intellectuals (and as Crispin suggests, a wonderfully literary writer), it is somewhat surprising that his work has not found more traction within rhetoric and composition. On the rhetoric side of things, James has started to receive some attention, with his work recently examined by Robert Danisch and Paul Stob.<sup>8</sup> In terms of writing instruction though, I know of only two texts which deal with James in any substantive way.<sup>9</sup> Why has James been overlooked? William Gavin provides a hint when he writes that James has often been viewed as a "romantic intuitionist" who believed that life—or the interesting parts of it anyway—exists "beyond all language" (208). Though Gavin goes on to explain that this view is largely incorrect, it is easy to see why it persists. Language, as James understands it, makes thought possible, but is also sluggish, clunky, and overall, "wholly inadequate" to capture the ever-changing flux of lived experience (212). Though a careful thinker, James has no time for "intellectualizing" or "verbal formulas." Indeed, one of the main goals of his scholarly project is to reinstate "the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life" (PP 165). The "vague and inarticulate" is of course that which lies beyond language, that from which thought arises and must return. It is the realm of sensation, affect, habit and the object. Traditionally, these non-linguistic elements have been overlooked in discussions of writing instruction. In light of that, we can see why James has been little mentioned in the composition literature. We can also see, given the recent move towards theories of extended cognition, why James might be more relevant now than ever before. As will be detailed in coming chapters, after a social turn, the field has taken a material turn. The "great outdoors," in the form of texts, tools, objects and others, now more than ever takes a starring role in our theory. With his detailed explorations of both the conceptual and sensorial elements of experience, James is well-positioned to contribute to this conversation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Stob has an entire book on James: *William James and the Art of the Popular Statement* (2013)

<sup>9</sup> The first is Thomas Newkirk's *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, from 1997. Here, Newkirk uses Jamesian pragmatism to argue that composition should pay more attention to what narratives (even simplistic or cliché ones) do for students. The second, from 1998, is Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald's *Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism, and the Possibility of Teaching*. This text argues that composition can use a mash-up of pragmatism and romanticism "to reinvigorate its work with [a] sense of hope, mission, and passion" (1). Much other work is undoubtedly indirectly influenced by James. James Moffet's "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation," for example, makes very interesting (and Jamesian) use of the idea of the stream of consciousness.

## 1.8 WILLIAM JAMES AMONG THE FRAGMENTS

As suggested, I believe that the life and thought of William James are not just interesting, and relevant to the contemporary work of composition, but capable of providing much-needed solutions to the social problems wrought by technological advance. James, in fact, saw his own project very much in these terms. He lived and worked in a time of unprecedented social change. Modern science, especially Darwin's theory of evolution, had undermined the foundations on which Western civilization had long rested. Likewise, the American Civil War, followed by rapid industrialization, had transformed the economic and political landscape. The result, as Gale notes, was a traumatic bifurcation of man and nature, self and world. Much of James's thought—from his early psychological studies, to pragmatism, to radical empiricism—represents an effort to stitch together the resulting fragments. This is thought born of division. As such, it is particularly well-suited to the reality teachers and students now face.

James effort to come to terms with multiplicity is reflected on all levels of his work. As will be detailed in later chapters, on the metaphysical level he posits a world of radical ontological pluralism. This "metaphysics of democratic equality" holds that Darwin and God, common sense and theoretical physics, the mystical and the material, all sit side by side, are all equally "real" (Gale 150). On the most basic level, for James, there are worlds, rather than a world, a pluriverse rather than a universe. No single story can capture this multiplicity: there is always more. James's radical pluralism is not just descriptive, but also prescriptive. In essence, he believes that otherness—and the often traumatic engagement with otherness—is a necessary precondition for all intellectual, moral and social growth. Such a vision, and the ethical impulse it sustains, I will argue, can do much to help us survive a world broken into pieces.

On an epistemological level, James is, of course, most well-known for his articulation of the doctrine of pragmatism. As Louis Menand explains in *The Metaphysical Club*, pragmatism is chiefly an "attitude towards ideas" (12). It holds that ideas are tools. They are not fixed and can't be "found," whether in the Platonic realm or a rule book. Rather, they are socially produced, dependent on their environment, and, if they are to serve us well, must be allowed to remain fluid. The essence of pragmatism, Menand writes, is that "ideas should never become ideologies" (12). A pragmatist, as James writes in his typically vibrant prose, "turns his back resolutely and once for all upon... abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" (P 24). The rejection of the dogmatic and fixed allows the pragmatist thinker to merge concepts, mediate between apparent opposite, compromise. This flexibility is facilitated by a thorough self-awareness; pragmatism, we can say, acknowledges human potential, but at the same time makes one wary of belief (which is always interested, always partial, always fallible). As such,

Menand writes, it represents “a kind of skepticism,” designed to help people cope with life in a “heterogeneous, industrialized, mass-market society” (12). My claim is that when presented in the character of William James, it can also help writers and writing teachers cope with life among the fragments. By stressing flexibility, fallibility and responsiveness to lived experience, it provides a much-needed antidote to the cognitive rigidity, which as we’ve seen, characterizes thought in the digital age.

Intimately tied to the flexibility James promotes is his refusal to either seek, or propound, enteral truths. More than perhaps anything else, pragmatism, in its Jamesian guise, is defined by resistance to the top-down imposition of form. As Sarin Marchetti writes, James “fiercely opposed” any intellectual approach that sought to impose “a certain configuration of values and principles... on reality” (68). To be of maximum ethical and intellectual worth, the principles by which we live, James believes, must be the result of active thought, alive to the singular affordances of context. With this in mind, the mode of philosophy James practices seeks to provoke, rather than reveal. As Marchetti puts it, James always “aims at making us *do* something” (26). He seeks to spark transformation, not by demanding allegiance to that which lies beyond the individual (God, culture, a utopian future), but instead, by giving each person the “instruments to better deal with [his or her life] from within its practice and exercise” (Marchetti 18). Dr. James, in short, doesn’t dispense meanings. Instead, he attempts to give his readers the tools to create their own. He does this by providing a model of reflection, intellectual rigor and inclusivity, a bit of encouragement and a lot of provocation. As such, I believe he provides an apt model for the writing teacher.

Of course, James, being a complex thinker with a large catalog of work, can be read in multiple ways. My reading, as will become clear, emphasizes the *material* element of James. I do this for a number of reasons. First, I believe his earlier, natural science-based psychological studies (among which *Talks to Teachers* can be numbered), are more relevant to writing instruction than, say, his discussions of human immortality or mystical states. Second, when read as a materialist, James speaks directly to the concerns of recent composition theory. Integrally though, his thought represents a challenge to much of this theory.<sup>10</sup> James is certainly not a cognitive internalist of the Cartesian stripe: he recognizes that we always think with and within a matrix of objects and others. He diverges from current theoretical trends though in that he demands that the thinking-feeling human body—what he calls the “storm centre” of existence—be understood as the ultimate source of all knowledge, all value. This emphasis on the individuated, embodied human, in turn, becomes a key component of my project.

---

<sup>10</sup> Richard Gale, for example, writes of James’s wish to be a “Promethean agent,” the “active cause” of his own self-realization (3). This respect for individual freedom, and even power, is certainly not in vogue.



To explain what for some may appear to be a retreat to a passé, “humanist” perspective, I will note that James was trained as a medical doctor. Heavily influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, he describes his thought as a form of “naturalism,” rooted in the belief that “the environment kills as well as sustains” (RE 42). According to this view, all cognition—from the recognition of a snake in the grass, to our highest ideals—arises out of the Darwinian drive to survive in the face of a hostile world. This means that to be of any worth, concepts must lead back into sensible experience, they must help our body (and soul) survive and thrive. Contemporary composition theory is not so grounded. A theoretical discussion of the ways in which texts circulate among computer networks, for example, without noting the ways in which this circulation impact human bodies, or furthers human values, would be of little interest to James.

My project asserts that the unbreakable link James draws between thought, body and world is integral to combating the hegemony of the fragments. When held at a remove from human experience, whether as Platonic ideals or ideological buzzwords, ideas take on solid form. They become monuments, monoliths. Conversely, when understood as human constructions, intimately related to and growing out of the world of bodies and things, the opposite is true. Now ideas are flexible, fluid. In short, when tied to the material world, concepts are held to account. Human experience is the site of this alchemy. It follows that to disrupt ossified ways of thinking and being, it is to lived human experience—perception, cognition, life—that we must direct our attention. On the theoretical level this means interrogating our disciplinary concepts, trying to trace what actually they *do*. As Welch and Scott put it, we need to consider actual *bodily impacts*, not just texts and tools. On a pedagogical level, a return to the body means increased awareness of the role we, as embodied humans, play in the construction of reality. How does my physical being, for example, affect the way I understand this image or idea? As will be detailed in later chapters, it also means using the power of sensation to reveal, and ultimately challenge, the abstract and insufficient. There is always more “there” than we perceive. This excess is capable of disrupting even the most rigid fragment. A Jamesian writing pedagogy, by centering on the thinking-feeling human body, seeks to tap this excess.

\*\*\*

Richard Gale perceptively notes that the metaphor of open doors and windows appears again and again in the writings of William James. Dickinson Miller, James’s friend and colleague notes this too, writing that James’s thought demands “open doors and windows,” to any “idea, mood, attitude [or] propensity,” which might aid in the “richness and satisfaction of human life” (qtd. in Gale 5). In the above, I’ve argued that the forces of neoliberalism and technological innovation have slammed certain doors shut. As a result, thought has grown increasingly rigid, unyielding, dogmatic. I’ve termed this state of affairs the hegemony of the fragments. And I’ve suggested that resistance to it can revitalize both the teaching of writing on the classroom level, and rhetoric and composition as a discipline. The figure of

William James—a new character in our disciplinary drama—indicates one form this resistance might take. As we’ve seen, James refuses to offer assurances. Instead, he uses our shared precarity to spur individuals towards more expansive acts of meaning making. This entails close attention to both ourselves and our world. To open the door to the former—to sensation, perception, and the role we play in the construction of reality—equals an inevitable alteration of the latter. This is an alteration composition should seek to affect.

## 2. TOWARDS A JAMESIAN THEORY OF DISCOURSE

### 2.1 THE WATERS OF THE METAPHYSICAL

In the epilogue to the abridged version of his epic *Principles of Psychology*, William James makes a curious move. *The Principles*, published in 1890, sought to distill the combined learning of the then-emergent field of psychology. By all accounts it was wildly successful, sparking talk of a “New Psychology,” based on the methodology of the natural sciences and capable of unlocking the secrets of the human mind. Only two years later, James is quick to dispel this notion. Though his project treats the description and explanation of states of consciousness as a “natural science,” he writes, this should be understood as “a phrase of diffidence, and not of arrogance” (BC 468). To practice a science means to limit one’s scope of study, “to stick to... arbitrarily-selected problems,” accede to certain assumptions, and in the whole, deal with experience in a “partial and provisional way” (BC 1). The idea is that by establishing clear boundaries, variables can be standardized, laws formulated, and cause and effect mapped. If his epilogue is any indication though, by 1892 James had serious doubts about the feasibility of such an approach when dealing with the human mind. “Psychology as a natural science,” he writes, “means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint” (BC 468). The leaky state of his discipline means that if understanding is to be achieved, the field’s “elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections” (BC 468). For James, this means a turn to philosophy—“the Science of all things”—and to metaphysics (BC 2). It is to these pursuits that he would devote the rest of his career.

I begin this chapter with reference to James's "philosophical turn," because I believe an analogy can be drawn between composition as an intellectual pursuit and academic psychology, circa-1890. In the preceding chapter I argued that of late, our field's theory has been misdirected, focusing too much on tools and texts, and not enough on the real-life consequences of discursive practices. In this chapter I argue that to better understand (and mitigate) those consequences, we must reconsider our "elementary assumptions and data"—our thoughts about texts and textual production—in light of "wider connections." For composition theory, of late, "to connect" means to project outward, to move from the concrete into the abstract realm of networks and circulation (or the supposed real of ecological systems). The following inquiry does not take this route. Instead, it seeks to trace the *actual lived relationship* between word and world, text, thinker and thing. This requires stepping outside disciplinary boundaries, engaging unexamined assumptions. By doing so, I hope to lay the groundwork for a better (e.g. more beautiful, more useful) mode of composition theory.<sup>1</sup>

As James indicates, when we move beyond the partial and provisional—when we recontextualize what disciplinary approaches have decontextualized—we engage the metaphysical. Now, don't let this term frighten you. "Metaphysics," James writes, "means only an unusually obstinate attempt to think clearly and consistently" (BC 461). It addresses questions which our practices "suggest but do not solve," questions relating "to the whole of things, or to the ultimate elements thereof" (BC 462). Metaphysics, in short, involves the study of the integral, but unspoken. It's important to note though, that as I understand the term, metaphysical inquiry doesn't seek foundations. Instead, as James's friend and ally F.C.S. Schiller writes, it's a form of "intellectual mountaineering," a subjective, creative activity, always informed by the metaphysician's interests and investments (197). In my case, those interests and investments are first-year composition and its use as a site from which to disrupt the hegemony of the fragments. My claim is that a theory of discourse informed by James's metaphysical thought is a necessary step towards this end.

In light of the above, any theory articulated in the following pages is perhaps best read with an eye towards its performative function. Drawing on J.L. Austin's notion of speech acts, Joseph Harris makes a distinction between the constative and performative functions of theory. A focus on the constative, Harris writes, asks whether an articulation accurately describes the object to which it purports to correspond. A performative take, on the other hand, looks to the possible effects of holding (and convincing others to hold) a certain view. This way of reading is concerned with consequences, with

---

<sup>1</sup> I understand composition theory as the activity of talking or writing about the teaching of writing. Discourse theory, as used here, is a subset of composition theory. It provides hints as to what writing is and what it does. A similar parsing of terms, and a template for the type of project in which I'm engaged, can be found in Louise Wetherbee Phelps's *Composition As a Human Science* (1988).

outcomes, and theory-as-rhetorical-posture. In composition, Harris argues, the performative function of theory should be our primary concern.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, what theory *does* will be a theme throughout this project. As James discovered in his explorations of consciousness, human thought and action (writing, teaching) is too complex to be trapped by the conceptual. Therefore, we can't expect our theory to provide us with a set-in-stone description of the writing act or an outline of the perfect lesson plan (see Kent). Instead, as Harris suggests, it's best to understand composition theory as "a form of discourse whose subject is the beliefs that guide our work as teachers and intellectuals—and whose aim is to change those beliefs and practices" (144). This is theory as an activity, an on-going process of evaluation and adjustment. It's innately rhetorical, a way we exert pressure on our practice to help us do our job better. "The final test of a theory," Harris writes, "is what we can do with it, what kinds of talk and writing it makes possible for ourselves and our students" (144). This hints at the goal of this chapter. As will become clear, to combat the hegemony of the fragments we need, in addition to a plan of action, a story about how and why that plan of action will work. Such a story is exactly what William James provides.

## 2.2 COMPOSITION'S (TACIT) JAMESIAN TRADITION

Before we try to think the metaphysical, it's necessary to situate ourselves. How is "composition" understood in these pages? From whence does it come and what does it seek? As is likely apparent, for me, composition is (and should remain) intimately linked to university writing instruction. In chapter one, I claimed that James has appeared little in the scholarly literature referencing this activity. This is not to say, though, that Jamesian thought is alien to the writing classroom. Quite the opposite. I believe that a certain pose, a certain attitude towards thought and language, sustains both James and some of composition's most influential theory. By tracing this line of thought—and its limitations—we can define composition and start to see how such a project can challenge the hegemony of the fragments.

Francophiles and philhellene rhetoricians might deny it, but composition, is, at heart, an American enterprise. And William James is perhaps the most American of philosophers, an "authentic

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course, a theory's persuasiveness will always be based, at least in part, on its perceived correspondence with reality, making this distinction, like Austin's original constative/performative distinction, a bit of a thought exercise.

American intellectual frontiersman,” to quote Cornel West (55). In light of this, it’s perhaps not surprising that James has influenced comp theory. What’s the nature of this influence? Literacy critic Richard Poirier hints at it when he writes that pragmatist thinkers share “a liberating and creative suspicion as to the dependability of words and syntax” (5). The slipperiness of language, its innately metaphorical nature: yes, this is an important component of the tradition in which I work.

Another important component is the recognition of both the generative and restrictive power of tradition, convention and commonplace. Poirier argues that American pragmatism—and its complicated relationship with the past—has its roots in Emerson. For Emerson, discursive formations or “circles” of thought and speech “actively create truths and knowledge,” therefore shaping our experience of both self and world (22). At the same time, though, the Emersonian individual constantly seeks to move beyond what came before. Circles, Poirier writes, “solidify and hem in life,” therefore, any idea “to which one conforms... becomes constrictive, a provocation to escape” (23). One escapes through attention to the complexity and mutability of lived reality—what Poirier calls the “vague” and “superfluous”—along with an embrace of her own world-making potential. “Nothing is secure,” Emerson writes, “but life, transition, the energizing spirit” (qtd. in Poirier 28). The Emersonian writer, in turn, seeks to use this vital force to personalize shared cultural forms, thus taking ownership—however provisionally—of thought and language.

James is sustained by a similar impulse. In locating truth in the flux of human experience rather than the static realm of ideas, he exalts the potential of the vibrant and singular. “I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms,” he writes in a famous letter to the founder of Radcliffe College, “and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world” (qtd. in West 59). James believes that given time, these “molecular moral forces” will reshape the social order, “rending the hardest monuments of man’s pride,” and restructuring our shared experience (Id). The result is a lifelong interest in the small, the local, the individual.

So where can we find the pragmatist legacy in contemporary composition? Numerous connections could be made, but for our purposes, the work of David Bartholomae is perhaps the most relevant. The author of one of the field’s most-widely cited essays and co-author of a popular textbook series, Bartholomae is undoubtedly a mainstream figure. As with many in composition, the impact of American pragmatism on his work is extensive, though largely unspoken. It can be found in his insistence on the duplicity of language, its tendency to hide as much as it reveals, as well as his demand that students consider the *consequences* of certain words and certain ways of speaking. Bartholomae is also personally connected to the pragmatist tradition, having studied with Richard Poirier. Poirier, Bartholomae writes, taught him to see writing as an action, “an activity, an agitated, often dislocating effort to appropriate and change the reality it confronts” (2017 29). He was taught to see even the humble

sentence as “a gesture... a way of being alive in the world” (Id). In these lines, I’d argue, we see the Emersonian impulse on display. We see the individual world-maker fueled by Emerson’s “energizing spirit,” struggling with the limitations of his (shared) tools. Similar themes of appropriation, power and struggle run throughout Bartholomae’s work. In this regard, he resembles William James.

So how does Bartholomae—as a sort of closet Jamesian—understand composition? His essay “What is Composition and (If You Know What That Is) Why Do We Teach It?” provides a convenient point of reference. Here, Bartholomae presents our shared enterprise not as a professional grouping or body of knowledge, but as “a set of problems produced by a wider, more diffuse set of practices and desires, usually brought into play by instances of language change or variety” (327). So language can be and is used in different ways, for different ends. This fact has systematic consequence, calls forth certain questions, creates certain problems. Composition is tasked with engaging these problems.

Bartholomae provides an example of composition’s mode of engagement via an analysis of a prize-winning student essay. Though appreciative of the essay’s formal properties, he critiques it as “too good, too finished, too seamless” (329). There’s a sense of closure in the essay which he resists. Poirier writes that pragmatism demands “disciplined resistance to the blandishments both of conclusiveness and of common sense” (42). Here we see such an attitude in practice. In true pragmatist style, Bartholomae wants a text which is more messy, less finished, in order to “imagine other possible narratives,” to open a space in which lines of thought silenced by the dominant narrative can emerge (329). In this act of space-making, and the anti-hegemonic impulse behind it, we catch sight of composition’s first defining feature. In short, when dealing with problems of language change and variety, composition in the pragmatist mode seeks not just understanding (in the sense that the biologist understands the frog), but active *intervention*. More specifically, comp seeks to challenge, and thus invigorate, our cultural inheritance by cultivating *diversity of thought and story*. Here, Bartholomae seeks to achieve this through formal disruption of the supposedly “excellent” student essay.

As detailed in chapter one, throughout Western society, the contraction and ossification of thought (the tightening of “circles,” you might say) is currently the order of the day. In light of this, the need to foster new and better stories is as pressing as ever. Other social groupings may share this goal though: how is composition different? According to Bartholomae, composition differs from say, community activism, because of the highly localized nature of our project. Composition, he writes, “is concerned with the how and why one might work with the space on the page” (336). This “binds it to the ordinary” and “assumes the direct intervention in specific projects where... the gains are small” (336). Taken together, these lines indicate the extent to which composition is defined by the attention it pays to real writers, writing for specific purposes in specific (institutional, cultural, political) settings. As an intellectual endeavor, composition brings the most sophisticated theoretical tools available to bear on

these seemingly “ordinary” writers and writing situations. This focus on the local, once again echoing Emerson and James, is composition’s second defining feature.

Of course, the local—whether the student in the classroom or the text on a page—never exists in a vacuum. As Poirier puts it, “any particular thing or text is itself superfluous, part of a nearly overwhelming excess which is the essence of the universe” (57). Pragmatists believe that it is through engagement with this extra-textual excess that circles are disrupted, that language and thought are (re)vitalized. Composition, as Bartholomae understands it, recognizes this fact. To an extent. He encourages engagement with the vague and superfluous, but—and this is important—only at a textual level. In “What is Composition” and elsewhere, he has little to say about what lies beyond the text, or how we can harness its power in the writing classroom. In this focus on the discursive, he breaks with his pragmatist forbearers. And it is here, I’d argue, following James, that we spy “the waters of the metaphysical criticism” leaking in at the joints. Like a good disciplinarian, Bartholomae limits his object of study. Of course, he recognizes that the text bears some relationship to body, thought and thing, but the nature of this relationship doesn’t interest him. It can remain unexamined, he figures, and he can still do his job. Is this assumption still tenable? Given what we now know about the radically externalized nature of cognition, I don’t think so.

In chapter one I argued that of late, composition theory has seriously erred in failing to respect the local, as in the individuated, thinking-feeling writer. Bartholomae makes no such mistake. By emphasizing the text, he keeps “the writer” squarely in his sights. But, at the same time, an argument can be made that by failing to acknowledge the affective, material and sensual excess from which the text and writer emerge, he ends up engaging only an abstraction, a ghost. In ignoring the excess, Bartholomae is not alone. His position, on the whole, is that of mainstream composition pedagogy over the past thirty years. Following Emerson and James (as well as more recent new materialist thought), I’d argue that this tight textual focus limits our field’s transformative potential. To smash circles and create new lines of thought, we must find ways to let the outside in, to let the “vague” and “superfluous” elements of lived experience saturate and thus energize our thought and language. A Jamesian theory of discourse which tracks, and ultimately dissolves, the boundaries between text and world, writing instruction and lived experience, is a step in this direction. In a composition class informed by such a theory, the whole of our experience (affective + material + discursive) is implicated. It is understood that when we engage “the space on the page” we are shaping the machinery by which embodied subjects make sense of the world. Yes, we are still against bigness. And we still pay close attention to the ordinary, the local, the individuated writer. But now that writer is understood in a more holistic manner.



### 2.3 THE REHABILITATION OF JAMES BERLIN

So composition has been and should be an anti-hegemonic enterprise, intensely focused on the local. But we must also contextualize the local. Towards this end, the strain of composition theory I want to put forward walks a fine line: it positions the thinking-feeling writer at the center of the writing act, but refuses to discount the array of forces—many of them “vague and inarticulate”—which course through the writer. It focuses on bodily impacts, but recognizes that impact is always a term of relation. Tracing the nature of this relation, I’d like to suggest, should be one of the primary concerns of the composition theorist. Many of the best thinkers in our field have already done such work. James Berlin, for example. With the exception of Bartholomae, perhaps no figure in composition’s recent history has been on the “they say” side of more arguments than Berlin. His work is particularly valuable for our purposes because it makes explicit the metaphysical assumptions implicit in Bartholomae’s work. As noted, the latter understands composition as the cultivation of diversity of thought and story. Berlin, in essence, attempts to explain what forces we work through and against when we practice this art. He contextualizes our classrooms and conversations, drawing “wider connections,” as William James says. He does this most explicitly in his discussion of social epistemic rhetoric, a mode of writing instruction in which he situates both himself and Bartholomae.

Make no mistake: Berlin’s discussion of social-epistemic rhetoric is metaphysics. It posits a theory as to both what is and how we know what is. Per this theory, our reality is interactive, emerging from a dialectic between self, community and the material world. “For social-epistemic rhetoric,” Berlin writes in his oft-cited 1988 essay “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” “the real is located in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community...and the material conditions of existence” (488). Integrally, language structures this reality. As Berlin sees it, the dialectical interaction among contextual elements is “grounded in language,” with self, group and world all being “verbal constructs” (488). A materialist in the Marxian sense, Berlin doesn’t deny the existence of the non-linguistic. He does hold though, quite forcefully, that we cannot know the world apart from language. And language is always interested, “always already serving certain ideological claims” (477).

Ideology is a key term for Berlin. It is transmitted through language, and works at the very deepest levels of being, determining “what is real and what is illusory... what is experienced and what remains outside the field of phenomenological experience” (479). Ideology is always plural; competing (and conflicting) discourses, carrying different ideological inflections, circulate within each society and individual. These discourses work to benefit certain groups, further certain ends. We can’t step out of ideology, but Berlin does seem to believe that we can grasp its nature, and ultimately, bend the

interpretive process towards our own ideals. Social epistemic rhetoric, Berlin argues, does this by recognizing its own investments. It is “self-consciously aware” of the interested nature of rhetoric, thus providing its practitioners a means of “self-criticism and self-correction” (478).

In Berlin’s preferred mode of instruction, writing teachers make ideology—and its political and economic consequences—the center of classroom discussion. They seek to reveal what the dominate discourse has obscured, the goal being to make students realize how, through language, “control over their own lives has been denied them” (490).

Earlier, I accused Bartholomae’s project of being too focused on the page. Berlin escapes the page. Writing instruction, as he sees it, involves nothing less than the restructuring of subjectivity. The idea is thrilling. Also controversial. Some object to Berlin’s aggressive politicization of the classroom. Others have theoretical objections. Byron Hawk, for example, argues that Berlin is too rationalistic; he argues that Berlin’s focus on the consciously knowable forecloses “a more complete understanding of learning” (85), one which recognizes the importance of “bodily knowledge” and “tacit knowing” (116). Thomas Rickert lodges a similar complaint, noting that awareness of the power of discourse and actual resistance are not necessarily related.<sup>3</sup> His students *know* they don’t need expensive blue jeans, he writes, but buy them anyway.

I agree with these thinkers that the study and teaching of writing must partake in “what it means to be human and have a life” (Rickert 2007, 35). Berlin’s articulation of social-epistemic rhetoric, which at its core positions writer-thinkers as textual nodes, largely fails in this regard. That said, I view Berlin’s work as composition theory of the highest order. His effort to chart the (metaphysical) forces which animate our conversations and classrooms is exactly the sort of deep contextualization we need. Berlin must also be praised for the avowedly moral thrust of his theorizing and pedagogy. As I will detail in chapter three, writing and teaching always take place in service of an ideal. Berlin, unlike many writing teachers, foregrounds this fact. Finally, Berlin’s articulation of the social-epistemic paradigm is good theory from a performative perspective. It can help drive compositionists, make possible acts of writing and teaching of which we otherwise wouldn’t be capable.

To illustrate this point, a vignette.

December. Chicago, Illinois. At thirty-two, after having taught English abroad for a few years, I’ve taken my first tentative steps into academia, taking a course on education and democracy with Todd DeStigter at the University of Illinois-Chicago. As part of my final project, I came across Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Culture*. I remember the exact moment. The weather was very cold and plumes

---

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Graff, commenting on Berlin’s mid-career turn to strident Marxism, notes that it was like he suddenly “found religion.” Certainly, Berlin’s unabashed Marxism and associated air of self-righteousness is one reason he is so often cited (and challenged) in the composition literature.

of steam were rising from the foundry beyond my apartment. I held that little, silver book in my hands and felt that it was an object of great power.<sup>4</sup> Berlin's central thesis—that language structures reality and as such we have a choice in our reality—had never occurred to me before. To teach writing is to change the way students think and feel: to influence them on the most primal level. This was heady stuff. And it's not an exaggeration to say that it made me decide to become a writing teacher.

Now, perhaps language doesn't quite have the epistemic force that Berlin suggests. A more sophisticated understanding of the nexus between word and world, such as James provides, shows that experience is not entirely "grounded in language" (1987 16). Berlin's clunky, prescriptive Marxism is also outmoded.<sup>5</sup> That said, as we'll see, Berlin's belief that "there is never a division between experience and language" is fundamentally correct (1987 16). Language does intertwine with, and therefore impact, all elements of experience. This means that when we teach reading and writing, we are, in essence, teaching new ways of seeing, hearing, being. As Ann Berthoff, another compositionist working in the social-epistemic mode puts it, perception "is not something that comes first then we get ideas; perception is itself a construing, an interpretation, a making of meaning" (37). Perception itself is an interpretation. Yes. And in the writing classroom we teach different, more sophisticated, more moral, modes of interpretation. Taken seriously, this idea, which lies at the heart of Berlin's project, is of great consequence. On one hand, it makes composition important, gives writing teachers (like me) a reason to devote themselves wholeheartedly to our shared enterprise. On the other, it pushes our work off the page, out of the classroom even. It makes the whole of the student's lived experience our object of concern.

## 2.4 NEW MATERIALISM / POSTCOMPOSITION

So far we've taken a deep dive into some important work from composition's social turn. From this inquiry, we've drawn a definition of our shared enterprise, along with an understanding of the relationship between word and world which underlies that definition. The social epistemic paradigm presents the real as arising from the interaction, via language, of self, community and world. Language

---

<sup>4</sup> Stephen North's editor's note, which informs the reader that Berlin died prior to the text's publication undoubtedly added to the book's gravitas.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, I'd argue that anyone who believes social ills can be captured in terms such as "reification" and "false consciousness" is himself "mystified."

has pride of place in this scheme. It is also rather blocky, circulating in well-defined, seemingly mutually exclusive discourses. These discourses structure reality. By realizing this, we can control our lived experience, at least to a point. In essence, by changing the way we talk, we change the world.

Recent theoretical trends have challenged the social epistemic paradigm. As Laura Micciche puts it in an issue of *College English* devoted to “new materialism,” the primary tools of the social turn—“textual and linguistic analysis as well as ideology critique—have proven important but limited” (488). She goes on to criticize thinkers such as Berlin for “narrow[ing] what counts as the social” by putting too much emphasis on culture, language and other human constructs, at the expense of “matter” (488).<sup>6</sup> Micciche defines new materialist thought broadly. It includes ecological, affect, actor-network and posthuman orientations. The defining feature, she writes, is that such thought foregrounds a “relational ontology,” highlighting the ways in which being is shaped by intersecting forms of matter (488). The non-human is active, power and agency distributed. Writing, in such a world, Micciche claims, in a phrase which I believe captures the tenor of the times, is a “practice of coexistence” (498).

Of course, I’m all for coexistence. And, as we’ve seen, I agree that writing instruction must engage the material and affective, as well as the discursive elements of experience. That said, I have doubts about the efficacy of (most) materially inflected composition theory. It’s not for a lack of the metaphysical in such work; in fact, metaphysical claims are often key to new materialist thought. “With the rise of new materialism,” political theorist William Connolly writes, “the idea that you should try to be postmetaphysical is scrapped.... What replaces it is a contestable metaphysic and cosmology that emphasizes the dynamic, temporal and process character of systems and things” (400). In composition, this emphasis on the dynamic, temporal and processual is reflected in the “relational ontology” noted by Micciche. Put simply, the idea is that for most composition theorists today, what is—being—exists in a state of ever-changing, interconnected relation. This view is not necessarily incorrect; as we’ll see, similar ideas are at the heart of William James’s metaphysical scheme. The problem, as I see it, is that within composition studies, Connolly’s “contestable metaphysic” is too often not contested. Instead, of critical exploration of the actual character of text, thought and thing, we get blanket assumptions about “connection” and “fluidity.” These assumptions are then used to shape our understandings of teaching and writing. My claim, simply put, is that many of these assumptions are naive, ill-thought out and contradictory. As a result, our practice is compromised.<sup>7</sup>

\*\*\*

---

<sup>6</sup> As should be apparent, Micciche is describing, in slightly different terms, the same trend described in chapter one by Kristopher Lotier.

<sup>7</sup> Most tellingly, as argued in chapter one, a presumption of connection has left us unable to think the radical disconnection which characterizes the hegemony of the fragments.

The work of Sidney Dobrin provides a convenient synecdoche for our field's state of the art. Though, as we'll see, Dobrin doesn't care much about matter in the conventional sense, he does embrace Micciche's "relational ontology." In fact, in his efforts to distribute power and agency, he could be said to take this view to the extreme.

Dobrin's principle contention, laid out in two monographs and a series of edited collections, is that composition should focus less on the individuated writing subject (particularly student subjects) and instead seek to theorize writing itself. This desire to "theorize writing beyond the disciplinary limit-situation" means that Dobrin's work, like my own project, implicates the metaphysical (3). We are also both willing to question the seemingly sacrosanct bond between rhetoric, and rhetoric and composition.<sup>8</sup> That said, our aims are widely divergent. Unlike Bartholomae, Berlin and myself, Dobrin rejects the idea that university writing instruction can have positive social impact. He believes that the field is hopelessly compromised by its institutional position and that emancipation can be found only in the ethereal realm of theory. As such, he encourages writing studies to move beyond the "neurosis of pedagogy," and instead, devote itself to descriptions of what writing is and does (28). These descriptions, though, shouldn't implicate concrete objects, or as we'll see, context in any practical sense of the word. Instead, they should try to capture "the agency of writing itself" through the use of metaphor (78). The end game, the reason for such reasoning, seems to be a belief that discourse, when pushed to the limit, has the power to disrupt itself, thereby making space for new meanings. As detailed below, I don't believe this is possible. Dobrin's efforts to theorize writing are useful though, because they reveal the metaphysical underpinnings of much current composition theory. He is a prophet of fluidity and connection. As such, he is one with his time.

In his influential book, *Postcomposition*, Dobrin engages both posthuman and ecological thought, perhaps the two most important new materialist theoretical strains. In both cases, he celebrates their decentering of the individuated subject. The posthuman, he writes, demands "a realignment of focus not upon the individual as producer/originator of writing but upon the complex systems in which the posthuman is located, endlessly bound in the fluidity and shiftiness of writing" (72). Similarly, he praises ecological thought for presenting a "hyper-circulatory concept of system in which agents become indistinguishable from the system itself" (133). Composition theory, as Dobrin understands it, should be utterly holistic, privileging relations above all else. And writing is the fluid, ever-shifting medium through which relations relate. Writing, Dobrin argues, is a "dynamic, encompassing system inseparable

---

<sup>8</sup> Dobrin rejects the term rhetoric, and the methodology of rhetorical inquiry, because he believes it too often "defaults to a process of rendering parts of the whole identifiable," thus betraying a "will to simplicity and stability" (173). For my part, I simply prefer to draw on, and thereby celebrate, composition's own tradition (one informed by rhetoric but not one with rhetoric).

from...everything” (136). Like some sort of primordial ooze, it “saturates” and “penetrates,” and ultimately, through its fluctuations, defines reality.

Though Dobrin engages new materialist thought, I would not label him a materialist. Instead, he seems mainly interested in using posthuman and ecological thought as a source of metaphor to describe how language functions. Likewise, apart from vague claims like writing “saturates,” he makes no attempt to explain the nature of word and world or how these elements might interact. In fact, I’d argue he fundamentally cannot perform such analysis. This is because any interaction between word and world must take place within the realm of (embodied, individuated) human experience. Dobrin, being a priori anti-subject, can’t descend into this realm.

As we’ll see, William James, unlike Dobrin, strives to theorize life as it is lived. This requires strict contextualization. Overall, I believe such an approach can energize writing, making space for the new meanings Dobrin so values. When word is abstracted from world though, the opposite happens: thought and language tend towards stasis. To see how and why this might be, it’s useful to compare Dobrin’s radically acontextual approach to that of another influential composition theorist: Thomas Rickert.

Dobrin turns to Rickert in a discussion of complexity theory, another new materialist staple. He is generally supportive of the “networked logic” of complexity theory, but views its conception of networks and nodes as too linear to describe writing. Per his anti-subject bent, he wants to draw attention to the “not-node,” the spaces in-between points of connection, “as well as what occupies and what occurs in those spaces” (182). What occupies and occurs in the not-node is, of course, writing. From outside and beyond, it saturates networks. “Without the saturation of writing,” he argues, “nodes, knots, and networks are not” (183). Dobrin uses Rickert’s idea of “ambience” to support this claim.

Dobrin’s vision of writing as an uncontainable constructive force is appealing; though not a pragmatist, he’s hit upon something akin to Poirier’s “vague and superfluous.” I’d like to suggest, however, that in his exultation of the discursive, Dobrin distorts what should be a key takeaway from Rickert (and Poirier). Simply put, Rickert understands the world as many. Dobrin does not. He replaces Rickert’s pluralistic metaphysics (a metaphysical vision not unlike that of William James) with a monistic flux. This is a step backwards. Our senses, yours and mine, make very clear that writing is real (as in capable of making an impact), and that other things (rocks, cats, Donald Trump) are also real. In addition, we know that these things are different, both from writing and from each other. Sometimes they collide or connect; sometimes they do not. Rickert acknowledges this reality. Dobrin, with his abstract claims of saturation and textual fluidity does not.

Rickert sees ambience as working in conjunction with the idea of networks, but emphasizing “the constitutive role of the overall, blended environment” (2004, 904). So, from an ambient perspective, each

situation is fluid, in a sense, but also “blended.” Ambience, we can therefore say, pays respect to both parts (bodies, objects) and wholes (spaces, discourse). The overall goal is to “put place, language, and body into co-adaptive, robust interaction” (903). Language is an element in this interaction, of course, but not a God term. In fact, unlike “writing” in Dobrin’s world, there is no God term here. Instead, from an ambient perspective, “language and environment presuppose each other” (903). Language, in other words, both arises from, and returns to, the physical world. It penetrates being, sure, but cannot be said to constitute a field or flux which is somehow “beyond” or “behind” being and from which being emerges.

Not coincidentally, Rickert, like pragmatist thinkers, places great emphasis on context. One of the keys “to understanding ambience,” he writes, “is the particularity of a situation” (911). A “situation,” for Rickert, is always singular, a unique arrangement of matter in space. This becomes clear via his frequent discussions of ambient music. When a Brian Eno track is heard through Bose headphones on the Acela Express from Boston to Philadelphia by a slightly stoned account executive on a Thursday afternoon, the hum of the wheels, the rush of the wind and the boasts of the Patriots fan in the next seat all become constitutive parts of the experience. As does the dryness in the man’s throat and the circuitry of his iPhone. This respect for singularity is essential. It allows each setting, and thus writer-as-writer, to take on unique productive capacities. “The writer is not merely in a situation,” he argues, “from the ambient perspective, the writer is written by the environment, considered as the most singular, concrete moment” (920). As Dobrin suggests, in such a scheme conventional notions of agency and subjectivity are disrupted. But, the focus on the singular and concrete means that while the writer may be written by the environment, he or she is in no way *overwritten*. The presence of innumerable elements within the writing situation means that new and completely unpredictable levels of order are always possible. In short, Rickert, like James, recognizes the richness and complexity of experience as it is lived. His thought, therefore, allows—in fact, demands—new and novel acts of meaning-making. It doesn’t shut down conversation with God-terms.

Laura Micciche writes that theorists such as Dobrin, by substituting talk of matter with “the materiality of text,” betray a “longing for theory unfettered by the distraction of pesky subjects and their unruly bodies” (491). My claim is very similar. Reality, as Dobrin presents it, though “fluid” and “hyperconnected,” is rather boring. He posits an abstract monistic flux, and in doing so, fails to make room for the concrete and particular, for trains or Brian Eno songs or Micciche’s “unruly bodies.” This vision contradicts reality as it is lived. It also, as I hope I’ve shown through my discussion of Rickert’s more situated vision, limits the writer’s ability to make new connections, to tell new stories. Word separated from world tends towards stasis. The opposite is also true. To create space for new meanings, to take the “first step towards counter hegemony,” as Dobrin puts it, we need theory capable of thinking both (45).

## 2.5 WRITING AS A WAY OF BEING

Robert Yagelski's *Writing as a Way of Being* provides another example of new materialist thought in action. Unlike Dobrin and Rickert, Yagelski doesn't speak of networks or ambience. He does seek to engage matter though, and definitely displays a "relational ontology," forcefully arguing against various dualisms (and for coexistence). In this regard, his work fits within the new materialist fold. I turn to Yagelski in particular because, unlike Dobrin, he foregrounds the relationship between language and human experience. In doing so, he articulates an understanding of the real, and our relation to it, which I find is widely shared by writing teachers.

Yagelski's general premise is that Western society is undergoing a "crisis of sustainability." This is characterized by environmental destruction: global warming, deforestation, etc. In a provocative move, he traces this global catastrophe directly to Western education practices, particularly our way of teaching writing. When we teach writing, he argues, we teach fundamental lessons about the relation of the individual to community and to world. And the "basic lesson of mainstream writing instruction," Yagelski argues, "is disconnection" (4). Like seemingly all writers in the new materialist vein, Yagelski blames Descartes for the current state of affairs. A "Cartesian view of writing"—one which presents the writer as a self-contained mind confronting an external other—informs writing instruction at all levels (3). This teaches separateness, rather than interconnectedness, duality, rather than unity, and ultimately, makes real Margaret Thatcher's claim that "there is no society," only discrete, autonomous individuals. Disconnected as we are, we exploit the earth, drive SUVs, eat McDonalds, etc.<sup>9</sup>

Yagelski's proposed solution, on both a theoretical and pedagogical level, is to shift our gaze from writing as text (product) or writing as the production of text (process), to the actual experience of writing. He proposes an "ontology of writing" in which the object of inquiry is not what the "writing self does through or with writing but rather... the experience of the self in the act of writing" (107). Such a project, he argues, is capable of revealing "the writer's inherent connection to [the] reader and... all other writers and readers" (107). As this claim indicates, Yagelski views the writing act as capable of producing an expanded or heightened state of consciousness. Sustained dwelling in this space, over the long-term, he believes, can produce radical changes in subjectivity. It can transform us from Cartesian dualists to uber-connected Zen Buddhists.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> I find Yagelski's belief in impending ecological cataclysm (and the uncritical acceptance of the such discourse) to be further hallmarks of new materialist thought (See Paul Lynch's discussion of the field's "apocalyptic turn").

<sup>10</sup> Transcendence can be achieved by both expert and novice writer. When we struggle to "find the words," Yagelski argues, we become aware of those parts of our experience not captured by language, thereby revealing the



Overall, *Writing as a Way of Being* is a cogent and provocative book. I agree with Yagelski that how writing is taught conveys certain assumptions about self and world, about what “is” and how we can know it. Likewise, these assumptions operate largely below the level of consciousness, outside the realm of intent. Therefore, pedagogies which claim to be emancipatory, but fail to restructure our felt sense of being in the world, “miss the point” (55). Writing, as Yagelski sees it, is not primarily about the production of text or the achievement of certain rhetorical goals. Instead, it’s a means to live better. It’s a technology (my word) that when used properly, can help us “be in the world in a more reflective, self-aware, and... altruistic way” (159). I agree. We disagree, however, about how to achieve this end. Whereas Bartholomae and Berlin can be accused of privileging the discursive at the expense of the experiential, Yagelski makes the opposite mistake.

Like many new materialist thinkers, Yagelski positions himself against the text-centric social epistemic paradigm. Though he views writing instruction as key to shaping our understanding of reality, he challenges the view that truth and meaning are functions of language. Instead, he forewords the idea that reality—or the most important part of it anyway—is non-conceptual. This idea underlies his entire approach. The Cartesian view of writing, remember, posits an external reality more or less capable of being captured by language. Yagelski (rightly) rejects this view. Unlike social epistemic thinkers though, who, when deprived of extra-linguistic foundations, present language (or rhetoric) as the scene of truth-making, Yagelski turns to lived experience. Truth and meaning, as he understands it, lie in the living, not the telling. The telling, as in conceptualization, comes later. Although, as we’ll see, this idea that thought and experience are functionally separate is philosophical suspect, it is fundamental to Yagelski’s notion of an “ontology of writing.” Writing, as in marks on paper, can’t contain or convey truth. The *activity* of writing, though, that’s a different story. There is meaning outside language, remember, therefore the experience of writing, like any experience, can become a “ground for truth-seeking” (75). The actual production of text acts as “a vehicle for truth-seeking” (75). It helps us make sense of, and share, what we might discover within the vast world of the non-discursive.

I appreciate Yagelski’s efforts to articulate the metaphysical foundations of his claims. Ultimately though, those foundations are shaky. This failure appears most tellingly in his discussion of “nonduality.” As noted, as Yagelski sees it, the world’s biggest problem is a failure of certain (Western) subjects to recognize their inherent oneness. Our Cartesian view of language makes us assume separation, disconnection and duality; this forecloses the possibility of experiencing nonduality. The solution is to embrace nonduality in theory and engage in practices which make that state of being real.

---

possibility of a richer, more fully realized self. We can unlock this extra-linguistic “more,” and the sense of radical connection it promises, through careful attention to the writing act.

Yagelski himself claims to have experienced such a state while climbing in the Grand Teton mountains. High on a mountain ledge, his “sense of self seemed to dissolve into the moment,” leaving him with an intense feeling of connection and joy (73).

To justify nonduality on a theoretical level, Yagelski turns to the work of Eihei Dogen (1200-1253), described as a “great Zen Buddhist teacher” and philosopher (81). His discussion of Dogen is complex, but it comes down to the idea that this thinker, through meditation and self-reflection, is able to step beyond human delusion, learn and ultimately speak “what-is.” The Zen master, Yagelski writes, quoting Thomas Kasulis, “brings no personal, egotistic delusions into... expression,” therefore, through his words, “the occasion speaks for itself” (85). In short, he is able to live nondualistically, and use this state as a site from which to understand, and ultimately speak, non-linguistic truth. Reading Yagelski generously, we can say that he wishes to present Dogen as a model, proof that non-dualistic modes of thought and being are possible. Read less generously, however, it seems as if he is suggesting that Dogen, and his supposed forays into the real, support the fact of precognitive unity. Kasulis’s actual description of Buddhist practices bolsters this latter reading. He writes, for example, that it is just our “excess conceptual baggage with its affective components” that keep us “deluded,” i.e. separated from each other and the natural world (Kasulis qtd. at 85).

Now Yagelski is a sophisticated thinker and realizes that his discussion of nonduality may seem to be “smacking of foundationalism” (86).<sup>11</sup> Likewise, as noted, there’s more than a little “if you build it, they will come” aspect to his use of Dogen. It is the assumption of duality, or disconnection, after all, that prevents nonduality from being achieved. That said, when subjected to sustained metaphysical inquiry—the type in which composition theory must traffic—his arguments crumble.

I agree with Yagelski’s claim that truth lies in lived experience. And we certainly cannot dismiss Yagelski’s experience on that mountain ledge. That experience is clearly rich with truth and meaning. But—and here is the key difference—I would suggest, following William James, that those qualities arise not because at that moment on the mountain Yagelski tapped into some pre-discursive real.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Yagelski *made* the experience meaningful. This occurred via his pursuit and embrace of the moment (processes threaded through with discourse) and later when he projected that moment into the world, when he used it as an impetus for his book project, for example. As I understand it, meaning is always a relation, an interaction between word, world and purposeful agent. It entails connection, yes, but connection is created, not found.

---

<sup>11</sup> This sense of foundationalism is not dispelled, when on the next page, he insists that “modern physics” suggests that nonduality is a “legitimate description of the physical world” (87).

<sup>12</sup> This statement requires some explanation. James, being of a mystical bent, would likely believe that Yagelski and Zen master Dogen, in their moments of ecstasy, tap into some higher order of being—a pre-conscious, supernatural “world soul,” perhaps. Yagelski does not suggest this. He seems to believe in a *material* connection.

Similarly, I feel we need to reject the discursive / nondiscursive binary that underlies Yagelski's entire discussion of nonduality. It's not that truth resides solely in language, as James Berlin might say. It's also not that truth is primarily non-linguistic, as Yagelski believes. Instead, it's more accurate, and useful, to conceive of lived experience as a mix: every moment, as James suggests, is "shot through" with adjectives and nouns, as well as the "vague and inarticulate" rumblings of our body and/in the world. Experience is always discursive *and* non-discursive. So is truth. My argument is that composition theory should seek to better understand how text, things and bodies interact, how they inform, and can be made to inform, each other. This knowledge will help us use the nondiscursive as a means to disrupt, and expand, discursive structures. Yagelski believes something very similar. Ultimately though, his inability to sufficiently theorize the relationship between word and world, text and self, compromises his project.

\*\*\*

Earlier, I said that *Writing as a Way of Being* displays certain assumptions that are commonly shared by composition theory of the new materialist sort. Micciche hits upon this when she mentions new materialism's relational ontology. As noted, this is the belief that things exist not as discrete entities, but in relation. This is a fine idea, but I'd like to suggest that when not properly examined, it can end up twisting our theory in unproductive ways. Dobrin succumbs. As does Yagelski. His entire project is based on the inevitability of connection. He seems certain that once we get beyond the delusions wrought by human cognition our primordial interconnectedness will be revealed. In this way, he is very typical of new materialists thinkers. Whether in discussions of digital networks or natural systems, connection is too often taken for granted. This assumption needs to be challenged.

It is not that I am opposed to practices which try to make real the ways in which individual are entwined with other people, texts and things. In fact, as we'll see, William James's thought is radically holistic, with one of its primary aims being to challenge conventional dualisms such as subject/object and self/world. My claim is rather that when connection is assumed, when it is as seen as something to be revealed rather than constructed, growth is impeded.

As noted, the goal of composition should be to disrupt hegemonic thought regimes. This entails promoting more expansive acts of meaning-making, the active tracing of more connections, more relations. Sparking the sort of felt sense of universal connection Yagelski promotes may help achieve this goal. I don't see exactly how, though. Also, we should keep in mind that all of our experiences, even (especially) those which seem to reveal fundamental truth, must be subjected to critical, conscious

examination.<sup>13</sup> Their limits must be acknowledge and traced. Otherwise, we risk solipsism. As I argued in chapter one, in the digital age it is particularly easy to mistake our segment of reality for reality itself. By offering assurance that we are preternaturally attuned, blanket assumptions of connection further this tendency. This is true of composition theory which seeks only to reveal ever-new ways writers are overwritten by texts and things, and it is true of Yagelski's assurance of a unified real. Simply put, in rhetoric and composition, we must recognize that we never know (or feel) the whole story. There must always be a "more" out there, a piece of the world which is alien, to which no line has yet been drawn. This is what spurs us to create new, more inclusive meanings. Composition needs a metaphysics—a sketch of the ground on which we work—that allows for, and in fact demands, this constant (re)construction of thought and belief. Yagelski, and new materialism as a whole, fail to provide such a blueprint.

## 2.6 RADICAL EMPIRICISM

In the preceding pages I've argued that composition is undermined. Over the past three decades, our theory has moved steadily outward, tracing more and more lines of connection, naming more and more forces which impact the writer and shape the writer's text. All the while, what should be the core of our thought—the lived relationship between text and world—has been neglected. A Jamesian theory of discourse aims to correct this oversight. In doing so, it starts at the very bottom, so to speak, asking us to consider the very nature of the world in which we write and think. William James's metaphysical scheme, termed "radical empiricism," can guide our inquiry.

James had a long and varied career. A prolific author and speaker, he is perhaps America's greatest public intellectual. That said, his metaphysics has received little scholarly attention. Though James considered radical empiricism the culmination of his life's work, because of its provocative nature, it has often been assigned to the "spooky" side of his oeuvre (see Livingston). A review of the literature indicates that lately this has begun to change; more and more thinkers, it seems, are beginning to realize the doctrine's transformative potential. As we'll see, James presents, in essence, a new way of being: one

---

<sup>13</sup> This is one reason a metaphysics for rhetoric and composition must reject the idea of "pure" or unconceptualized experience. When we acknowledge that experience always contains a discursive component, there's a shared social element there which we can engage.

that rejects conventional dualisms, but at the same time respects the individual agent. “Between holism and a world of sundered parts,” Alexander Livingston writes, “radical empiricism envisions networks of ‘little worlds’ or ‘partial systems,’” always open to new and novel, more inclusive and more productive, connection (5). It is *humane* thought. And, as I hope to show, well-suited for rhetoric and composition.

So what is radical empiricism? David Lamberth writes that it “is a thoroughgoing metaphysical view of the broadest scope, integrating all the aspects of our lives and our world” (59). It is perhaps best understood as a melding of classic British empiricism with Darwinian naturalism. Like classic empiricism (that of John Locke and David Hume, for example), radical empiricism “remands us to sensation” (RE 3). It holds that “reality is created temporally day by day,” and that the “deeper features of reality are found only in perceptual experience” (RE 3). Empiricists, in other words, believe the world is the case. They start with what is, not abstract principles, take parts and try to construct wholes. James respects this, but believes that ordinary empiricism falters by displaying “a tendency to do away with the connections of things” (RE 21). The empiricist’s understanding of reality leaves too many gaps: between subject and object, mind and world, word and thing. His radical empiricism seeks to correct this by doing “full justice to...conjunctive relations” (RE 21).

Rationalist philosophies, such as absolute idealism, the dominant metaphysics of James’s day, also posit unity. Integrally though, radical empiricism locates the unifying “conjunctive relations” within sensory perception, as opposed to some transcendental realm such as perfect reason, the mind of God or “The Absolute.” At the most basic level, it holds that both relations (time, space, likeness, difference) and objects (cat, book, language) are real and directly accessible to humans. Each object or relation is neither inherently part of a single whole (rationalism) nor a monad grouped with other monads only by human thought (empiricism). Instead, each is *potentially* part of many wholes. These wholes come together and break apart through the activity of interested, world-making agents (often human, but not necessarily). In allowing for immanent connection, radical empiricism, like much of James’s thought, represents a sort of middle ground. At the same time though, it is radical, in that it takes what was once the providence of God (or “Reason”) and places it within felt human experience.

As noted in chapter one, James was heavily influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Following Darwin, he believes that the higher comes from the lower. This means that all thought and value—our greatest theories and most cherished ideals—all arise (or arose) from the Darwinian drive to survive in the face of a hostile world. The human, James writes, “whatever else he may be, is primarily a practical being, whose mind is given him to aid in adapting him to this world’s life” (P 25). There is no thought apart from matter; the transcendent always arises from the corporal. This baseline understanding leads to the view that knowledge is good only for what it does, famously formulated in the pragmatist maxim that “truth is what works in the way of belief.” Knowledge in such a system is always provisional,

always fallible (because what works today, may not work tomorrow). It must constantly be put to use, tested and reimagined. In other words, knowledge must be allowed to evolve.<sup>14</sup>

Radical empiricism describes the reality which necessitates pragmatism's view of knowledge-in-action. It situates the thinker within a constant, overwhelming flux of sensory inputs. This world of experience, James writes, "is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed" (P 14). It's always rushing forward, swamping our cognitive capacities: in every regard, there's more. This excess means that the lived present is a space of unlimited potential. But it's also unworkable. As such, "pure experience" must be immediately "taken," abstracted and manipulated so that it flows "as if shot through with adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions" (RE 39). Integrally, James understands this process of abstraction and conceptualization as *additive*. Reality, in short, consists of both "existential particulars"—sensory inputs or percepts—and the abstract concepts by which we navigate these sensory inputs. "Percepts and concepts interpenetrate and melt together, impregnate and fertilize each other," he writes. "Neither taken alone, knows reality in its completeness" (SP 53).

As noted in chapter one, some have marked James as a romantic, only interested in the parts of experience which lie beyond language. The above should dispel this notion. Simply put, for James, concepts—the communally created abstractions by which individuals and groups navigate experience—are important. They allow us to map the perceptual flux and assign value to what we find there. In doing so, they shape our reality. Concepts are never all there is though. "Every reality has an infinity of aspects or properties," James reminds us, of which the conceptual only captures a tiny sliver (BC 356). Though the act of perception, we abstract certain aspects from the flux, thereby radically delimiting what we see, hear and feel. Our selection of this real is "always unjust, always partial, always exclusive" (BC 356). It is based on our specific interests as embodied beings. We must be constantly aware of this fact. Otherwise, our conceptual schemes can work to "deny the very properties with which things sensibly present themselves" (PU 89). Thought, in other words, can limit understanding.<sup>15</sup>

Another key aspect of radical empiricism is the idea that thought, with its ability to abstract and divide, only works backwards. Experience, as it comes to us, has no "inner duplicity" (RE 8). In other words, according to James, divisions between subject and object, thing and thought, self and world, are only retrospective mental constructions. "There is no original spirituality or materiality of being," he

---

<sup>14</sup> Though pragmatism and radical empiricism are separate doctrines (the former is a theory of truth, the latter a metaphysics), they are mutually sustaining. A pragmatist thinker, James writes, "turns his back resolutely and once and for all upon... abstraction and insufficiency... verbal solutions... fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" (P 24). For the pragmatist, ideas are "instruments" used to reshape experience, not "answers to enigmas" (P 25).

<sup>15</sup> This idea is very similar to what Yagelski suggests through Dogen. The difference is that James doesn't seek to escape the conceptual. Instead, the goal is to use the nondiscursive to expand the bounds of the conceptual.

writes, “only a translocation of experiences from one world to another; a grouping of them with one set or another of associates for definite practical or intellectual ends” (RE 60). So within the realm of practice, of life, there is no functional division. Everything that is—language, matter, God, the body—is *virtually* there, and is capable of affecting other elements of experience.<sup>16</sup> The idea suggests a great intimacy of being, and at the same times, hints at the constructive power of thought. Many of the relations between these elements, after all, are only virtual. In a world of both connection and disconnection, they do not impact each other. A meaning-maker can change this though. By grouping elements of experience with “one set or another of associates,” thought can actualize connections which within pure experience are only potentialities. “Little worlds” or “partial systems,” as Livingston writes, can be bound together (5).

\*\*\*

Earlier, I suggested that composition needs theory which respects both the individuated, thinker-feeling writer and the array of forces which inform that writer’s text. In radical empiricism, I believe we find a metaphysical base on which to build such theory. Per radical empiricism, there does exist a human subject, “an objective nucleus,” as James calls the thinking-feeling body (RE 35). This subject, each subject, has desires, intentions and the ability to project novelty into the world. At the same time, within practice—during the writing act, for example—this subject is, in essence, one with the material, discursive and affective systems in which she moves. These systems shape her thought and her text in ways which, upon reflection, are both traceable and untraceable. Experience as lived is whole. Experience as conceptualized is partial. Thought abstracts and divides, but can also actualizes latent connections, thus (re)structuring both individual perception and shared reality. Yes.

## 2.7 TOWARDS A JAMESIAN THEORY OF DISCOURSE

So what can we do with our new metaphysics? How can radical empiricism change how we understand writing? In performing such an analysis we must keep in mind the purpose of our shared enterprise. As discussed above, composition, as I understand it, entails the cultivation of diversity of

---

<sup>16</sup> It may seem paradoxical, but as James understands it, lived experience is both one and many. Experience, David Lamberth explains, is “formally monistic,” in that it “posits a fundamental similarity among everything that can be philosophically categorized.” At the same time, it is a “pluralistic thesis” in terms of content, “allowing a radical variation of content or natures among or within pure experience(s)” (25).

thought and story. It entails breaking down barriers, and allowing the vague and superfluous—life's excessive elements—to energize language. We need to think about discourse in ways which provide for this sort of transformation. And here is where radical empiricism is valuable. Radical empiricism is, first and foremost, a *pluralist* metaphysics. By holding that reality is infinitely rich, infinitely varied, it demands that we keep looking, listening, grasping. “The world is full of partial stories,” James writes (P 58). They “mutually interlace and interfere,” but can never be unified completely (P 58). This commitment to pluralism, founded on the belief that every articulation leaves something out, that there's too much difference in the world to be contained or captured, can serve as a beacon. It reminds us that no articulation is final, every sentence can (and must be) revised. In short, radical empiricism forces us to keep writing.

The anti-hegemonic nature of James's thought is nicely captured in the “story of the squirrel,” an anecdote contained in the series of lectures published as *Pragmatism*. The story involves a man, and a squirrel on a tree trunk. The man tries to catch sight of the squirrel, but the squirrel keeps moving, keeping the tree trunk between itself and the man. In such a case, does man go round squirrel? This question, James writes, sparked a “ferocious metaphysical dispute” among his friends, who appealed to him for a solution (P 21). The answer, he determined, depends on how one groups sensory elements. If one understands “going round” as invoking relations of geography, the man does indeed “go round” the squirrel. If instead, one invokes relations of anatomy—squirrel back, belly, etc.—then, clearly, man does not go round beast. In other words, depending on how and for what purpose potentialities are actualized, there are multiple, equally valid ways to understand the event.

The story of the squirrel shows pluralism in action. It also illustrates how radical empiricism can spark the proliferation of meaning. Meaning-making, as I understand it, involves building connections, “the ability to see one thing as a sign for another,” as John Dewey says. Connection typically involves *abstraction*. To abstract is to identify the same quality in two disparate entities, and using that quality as a point of reference, create a new, higher-level order. For example, I am confronted with cat and pillow. I identify the quality of “soft” in both objects and group them under the new heading: “things that are soft.” Now, I have three linked items, hence a very basic meaning system.

Writing is, of course, a powerful meaning-making tool. By allowing us to visually represent elements of experience and their various qualities, it greatly expands our ability to draw connections. Radical empiricism expands this ability even further. Per this doctrine, remember, there is no gap between subject and object, thing and thought, squirrel and man. “The instant field of the present,” he writes, “is always experienced in its 'pure' state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple that” (RE 31). Paradoxically though, within this “simple that” there are infinite elements, each possessed of infinite aspects. It is a flux of the pluralistic sort—a one and a many—and therefore pulsing with possible points



of connection. These connections are actualized, as noted above, by the grouping together of certain elements. For example, James groups man and tree to make one story (“man goes round squirrel”) and man, squirrel belly and squirrel back to make another (“man does not go round squirrel”). In both cases, he takes the undifferentiated flux of experience and goes to work on it, actualizing latent connections. In both cases, he *makes meaning*. The key is that by multiplying possible points of connection, radical empiricism multiplies the possible meanings that can be made. It presents the everyday as a source of unlimited thought and story.

How might the above ideas inform writing instruction? Well, it seems to me, that a teacher under the sway of William James would view her students’ objects of inquiry—texts, life events, cultural artifacts—as infinitely rich. She would encourage student writers to capture as much of this richness as possible: through the use of detailed description, for example. She would then move them to draw connections, to abstract away from the parts to make wholes. She would recognize, though, that these wholes are always partial, always liable to disruption from the revelation of additional qualities, additional facts or details. In short, a Jamesian writing teacher recognizes that student texts are built from the bottom up. And that any text is only a temporary stopping point. Moved by this idea, she constantly pushes her students to create more and more expansive meanings.

Radical empiricism, as I’ve described, allows meaning to proliferate. It promises nothing though. A pluralist worldview, James writes, “is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but melioristic, rather. The world, it thinks, may be saved, on condition that its parts shall do their best” (SP 142). This is an attitude I believe composition would do well to adopt. It allows for intellectual and ethical growth, but demands effort, responsibility. The world, remember, pulses with potential lines of connection. But it is up to the thinker-writer to make these connections real. To do this—to relate one bit of experience to another, and ultimately create a whole bigger than the parts—takes work. It requires self-awareness and the constant interrogation of our practice in light of our ideals. In this regard, a Jamesian view demands both a constructive and critical attitude towards language. It holds that both reading and writing are thoroughly hermeneutic activities. To write without awareness of what you’re writing towards is simply not sufficient.

Related to the above, is the importance of deep contextualization when considering symbols and symbolic action. James, remember, views all “verbal formulas” as pallid in comparison to the vivid “thatness” of experience. Signs and symbols are essential—they make experience workable—but are also, by their very nature, radically reductive. As such, to understand what language is and does, we must, as Louise Wetherbee Phelps writes, shift our gaze from “symbols and symbolic structures in themselves to acts of symbolizing in social context” (134). This means viewing discourse as active, as language-in-use, as *contextualized discursive event*. Seen in this way, writing is dynamic and

performative. It always points beyond itself, and beyond any codifiable definition, into a world of selves, bodies, affects and objects. And it is known there by its fruits. This move from writing-as-structure to writing-as-event represents a move from the transcendent (ahistorical, static) to the immanent (temporal, vital). As indicated in chapter one, this sort of contextualization keeps us honest. It prevents us from reifying concepts. The recognition that each concept arises from and must return to the teeming, overflowing flux of experience, in turn, destabilizes meaning. It allows entry of the vague and superfluous.

\*\*\*

My goal in these pages has been to use the thought of William James to suggest a new and hopefully more productive way to conceive of the relationship between writer, word and world. So far my discussion has trafficked in abstraction. To follow William James, though, we must descend from the ethereal realm into the messy particulars of experience. As such, I'd like to use the above ideas to analyze a specific writing act. In doing so, it's important to remember that a Jamesian theory of discourse is intended to allow for maximum creativity. Given any object, an infinite number of stories can be told. What story emerges will depend on the storyteller.

I'd like to center my story on Mark Corrigan, a character from BBC 4's long-running comedy series *Peep Show*.<sup>17</sup> Circa season eight, Corrigan is an aspiring author living in Croydon, south London. After losing his job as a credit analyst, he sets out to write a book of business advice modeled on the teachings of the ancient Egyptians. One night, high of caffeine, he sets down at his computer and types the following chapter heading: "Make UK Business Law Your Anubis." So how should we understand this act of textual production? What's the relationship between writer, word and world? David Bartholomae, for one, would tell us to engage in an act of "practical criticism." This entails interrogating the text "in relationship to the problems of writing and the problems of disciplinary knowledge" (332). In doing so, we'd likely foreground issues of power and authority. What textual moves, for example, grant Corrigan, a business-writing novice, authority to speak in that field? James Berlin would want us to foreword ideology. He'd ask use to consider how the dominate discourse shapes what Corrigan can think and imagine, and how competing discourses may be leveraged to disrupt his (capitalist) inclinations. Robert Yagelski, with his "ontology of writing," would draw our attention to Corrigan's actual experience that night. What does he feel in the moment, sitting at his computer, typing away?

---

<sup>17</sup> Corrigan's experience makes for an apt example because he is very clearly not a skilled practitioner. Instead, like a first-year writing student, he is struggling to write and think in a new discourse. I've found that depictions of amateur writers in this vein are rare in popular culture.

I can see the value in all these modes of analysis. Each makes the writing act more intelligible, thus allowing for more effective intervention. How does a Jamesian analysis change the conversation? Well, first, we must remember that a Jamesian theory of discourse “starts from the very bottom,” so the speak. Rooted in James’s radical empiricism, it holds that Corrigan is a mind-body, an individuated thinking-feeling subject immersed in a flux of sensory experience. Through acts of perception and cognition he makes cuts in the flux, composing his world. His actions are purposeful and potentially novel. This does not mean that Corrigan is in anyway monadic or self-contained, though. Instead, he and his text exist at the intersection of multiple discursive, affective and material processes.

A Jamesian analysis seeks to convey the interpenetration of energies inherent in the writing act. This requires close attention to and thick description of the various and varied forces with which Corrigan, as a mind-body, resonates. These forces are discursive (an article he read in the *Times* that morning, the rules of English syntax), affective (love of history, fear of death), and material (the caffeine in his bloodstream). They all collide in, but do not determine, Mark Corrigan. And they work all at once, shaping his text. Some are cognizable; many are not. Integrally though, those which are cognizable are revealed only in retrospect, and only through future interested acts of meaning-making.<sup>18</sup>

Turning to Corrigan’s text, “Make UK Business Law Your Anubis” is understood as the symbolic remnant of a purposeful act of meaning-making. Earlier, I claimed that meaning exists when a thinker is able to draw connections between various bits of experience, to see one thing as sign of another. As noted, this typically involves abstraction, the identification and merger of shared qualities. Indeed, this is what Corrigan does when he ties the Egyptian god of the afterlife to UK business law. He locates the same in two different things and thus becomes able to see one for the other. When he joins them, the result is a third thing: new and more complex. Though a simple example, the movement displayed here is the essence of human thought. Disparate bits of experience are linked via concepts; concepts are linked to create webs of meaning. These systems, in turn, make order out of chaos.

It’s important to once again emphasize that from a Jamesian perspective, when Corrigan links disparate parts of experience to create meaning he is doing more than just describing some pre-existing state of connectivity. Instead, he is *actively creating* connection. In a pluralistic universe, remember, the experiential flux pulses with possible links. These links are only virtual, though. UK Business Law and ancient Egyptian gods are, for all intents and purposes, absolutely separate until a meaning-maker—like

---

<sup>18</sup> What story will be told depends on what relations the future writer-thinker chooses to invoke. For example, using affective relations as a guide, she could examine the ways in which Corrigan’s emotional connection to the ancient Egyptians, popular history texts and the demands of capitalism, shape his discursive production. Alternatively, thinking in terms of physical relations, she could examine the impact of his computer’s word processing program, the caffeine flowing in his veins and the UK’s publishing regime. In the abstract, each of these articulations is equally valid. In practice, of course, different contexts demand different lines be drawn.

Mark Corrigan—unites them. When this occurs, our shared reality is altered. Perhaps law + god will allow Corrigan to understand credit analysis in a new way. Perhaps its circulation will alter the actions or beliefs of others. Either way, this concept is now something in the world with which we must contend. It is now part of our reality.

So concepts are important. Integrally, though for James, they are also understood as partial and utterly mutable. Law + god is a human creation. It was created by Corrigan at a specific time, at a specific place, to meet the needs of that time and place. Confronted with the same bits of experience (the sensual inputs we label UK business law and ancient Egypt), other thinkers will abstract other elements and create different concepts. Depending on the context of creation and deployment, these concepts—though potentially opposed to Corrigan’s—may be equally valid, equally real. It is within the realm of embodied human experience that this determination must be made. And human experience is always singular.

As noted above, a Jamesian mode of analysis demands deep contextualization. Now we see why. To evaluate Corrigan’s statement we must know the consequences of law + god as it moves among the world of objects and relations. We must also recognize our own positionality. Is this effective rhetoric? As a truth claim, is it true or good? We simply cannot say in the abstract. The answers depend on the consequences of the statement in a particular, delimited time and place. And they also depend on who we are and why we are asking. A Jamesian theory of discourse demands that we constantly perform this sort of bifocaled analysis. It suggests that there are truths to be had, but that they are always local, always limited, and always changing. The task of the analyst is to know herself, know her world, and let circumstances lead.

\*\*\*

In the above, I’ve argued that composition needs a new story about the relationship between thinker and thing, word and world. Towards this end I’ve sketched a theory of discourse based on the metaphysical thought of William James. By situating the writer within the multitudinous flux of lived experience, this vision of what is renders boundaries provisional, new forms of connection possible. If we see the world in this way, I believe, we will start to think about writing instruction in new, more creative ways. We will become more adept at tapping the vague and superfluous, and thus sparking the generous, expansive meanings necessary to disrupt the hegemony of the fragments. “Our fields of experience,” James writes, “have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds” (RE 30). More expansive, more inclusive thought and story, I believe, can only be found by exploring this more. A Jamesian theory of discourse provides a framework for such exploration.

### **3. COMPOSITION AS ETHICAL ENTERPRISE**

#### **3.1 COMPOSITIONIST AS CLERIC**

This chapter is about the good—what we value, what we want and work towards. I will present a way of thinking and being, which, simply put, I believe is better than any alternative. This is perhaps a bold statement. Even in the interpretive humanistic fields, academics often feel compelled to avoid direct assertions of value. There are, perhaps, good reasons why this might be. In society at large it seems that claims of “right” or “good” are more often used to shut down conversation than to spur it. We associate talk of values with dour authority figures, the priest or principal trying to legislate skirt length or sexual mores. Well, I’ve never been to church and have no interest in telling you how to dress. I do think, though, that it’s important for writing teachers to make clear where we stand. And whether we acknowledge it or not, we always stand somewhere.

Patricia Bizzell, one of composition’s most self-aware theorists, writes that when we teach writing in the university we are inviting students to share “a certain set of intellectual habits and ethical predilections... asking them to accept a certain kind of relation to their culture” (161). As such, it is “hypocritical to pretend that academic activity is value-neutral” (162). I agree. Unfortunately, it seems that hypocrisy is the name of the game. It’s of a complex sort, though. Bizzell, for example, writes of the “moral fervor” with which many writing teachers approach their work (162). To me, this seems right, as in both an apt description and how things ought to be. In my experience, teachers, the good ones anyway, typically do believe that they are working towards a greater good. Any teacher who doesn’t should

probably find another job. This is especially true for writing teachers. Writing, as discussed in chapter two, is not just a skill, like operating a chainsaw. Instead, it has the ability to alter meaning systems and thus perception. This means that writing instruction, *changes* people. I think most compositionists recognize this fact. At the same time, though, our field tends to avoid responsibility for the changes we seek. We are often unable or unwilling to identify the larger goods that our practice serves. Our ideals, in other words, remained cloaked behind unexamined norms or faux-objectivity. This, I believe, compromises our practice.

An illustrative example:

Not long ago I encountered a friend in the lobby of the neo-gothic university building where we both work. We stopped to chat. Apparently, in class that day, one of my friend's first-year composition students had used the word "retarded" to describe a classmate. She chastised him. He was contrite, but my friend wasn't satisfied; she felt like she'd just silenced the student, rather than using the event as "a teaching moment," as we say. Trying to be supportive, I asked her to take me through the encounter. "What was your explanation as to why he shouldn't use that term?" "It's offensive." "Why?" Here she paused. After a bit more Socratic pestering on my part, it became clear to both of us that despite the (moral) repugnance she felt at the student's statement, and her certainty that it had no place in the classroom, she had yet to think through the justification for her belief. Now, I don't want to imply that my friend is not a competent scholar or teacher. I'm sure if given time, she could write a great essay on the rhetoric of disability. At that moment though, when she confronted this student and attempted to enforce the norms of our community, she was uncertain as to the larger good those norms serve. This uncertainty compromised her practice.

The above example, illustrates, I think, the problem with not acknowledging our investments. We don't just teach writing or thinking. Instead, we teach certain types of writing and thinking, and we do so because we believe that these ways of being are *better* than the status quo. There's a moral imperative here, a good, or array of goods, which our actions serve. My claim is that we need to do a better job of articulating these goods. We need to be willing and able to say what we believe, what we want, and most importantly, who we want our students to be. There's an element of persuasion in this sort of discussion, of course, but consensus is not necessarily the goal. Instead, the process of identifying and defending our values is of intrinsic worth. Through our shared engagement we can start to see ourselves, and our ideals, in new ways. We can note contradictions, make connections. In this sense, ethics talk involves ongoing inquiry as to what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how we can do it better. And in my opinion, within composition studies, such inquiry is never optional.

\*\*\*

Among those willing to talk greater goods, what are the dominant trends at the moment? Critical pedagogy, celebrating empowerment and emancipation, seems to be on the wane. In its place we find new materialists promoting connection without telos, on the one hand, and activist academics, advocating for the rights of disadvantaged groups on the other. William James does not fit easily into either of these categories. He knows the practical value of ideals, of *teloi*, even if unattainable, and he refuses to view ethical action as a team sport. Where does he stand then? Cornel West writes that James is “first and foremost a moralist” (54). Whether eulogizing civil war veterans or exploring mystical states, here is a man clearly striving to become *better* and to help others do the same. Towards this end, he writes with great force about gods, faith, the “energies of man,” and the ways in which these forces can and should be brought to bear upon life as it is lived. “The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism,” the tradition James inaugurated, West writes, “is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse” (4). Yet James never comes off as preachy or didactic. Perhaps pragmatism is best defined as *therapeutic* thought. It seeks to inspire, not to indoctrinate. Openness to lived experience, flexibility, sureness of purpose, generosity of spirit: these qualities define both James and the change he seeks.

James, I’ll argue, embodies an *ethics of attunement*. This is a critical, constructive habit of mind which attends closely to context in order to name, and rename, the world. In making the case for such an ethics, I’ll first discuss the good as presented in James’s “Talks to Teachers” lecture series. I’ll then discuss how ethics has typically been conceived in rhetoric and composition, paying particular attention to composition’s postmodern moment, which in many ways parallels James’s own thought. Next, after examining some more recent new materialist thought, I’ll return to James’s writing, illustrating, through a discussion of his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” what an ethics of attunement might look like. Finally, I’ll move to the classroom, showing how such an ethics can invigorate writing instruction. Overall, I hope to show that a strain of composition theory inspired by William James is capable of forging both better writers and better people.

As is perhaps apparent, this chapter builds on those that came before. In chapter one, I argued that Western society is undergoing a crisis of meaning. With the rise of digital technology, and the radical fragmentation of our lifeworld, thought and story have ossified. In chapter two, I argued that composition can assert a much-needed counterforce. To do so though, we need a new metaphysics, a theory which explains the relationship between word and world, thinker and thought. James’s radical empiricism, which presents the writer as an embodied, thinking-feeling being, fills this gap. So, in short, so far we have the hegemony of the fragments. And we have the writer as thinking-feeling being. I believe that we can use the latter to challenge the former. This chapter makes clear the moral impulse behind such a move. It argues, in short, that compositionists are clerics and that growth is the go(o)d we serve.

### 3.2. FINDING THE RIGHT NAME FOR THE CASE

What or whom does William James serve? Perhaps it's best to start with what ethics in the Jamesian sense is not. Unlike much moral theory, Jamesian ethics refuses to issue prescriptions. As Sarin Marchetti writes, James fiercely opposes any moral code "that would rule our moral lives from above their contingencies" (22).<sup>1</sup> For James, in other words, the good is local; it can't be transferred from philosopher to citizen, or teacher to student. This means that ethics, as practiced by James and as presented in the following pages, must be "hortatory rather than prescriptive" (Marchetti 23). Instead of propounding a set of rules—a better to replace a previous better—the goal of the moral philosopher (or composition theorist) is to provoke and stimulate, to challenge others to identify and reevaluate their moral assumptions. The goal of such inquiry is to open up new vistas, make possible previously foreclosed options, both for the individual and society. These vistas always emerge first at the individual level, though. "Ethics practiced in a Jamesian way," Marchetti writes, "is about giving us instruments to better deal with the moral life from within its practice and exercise" (18). My better can never be your better, in other words. Instead, all we can do is continuously challenge each other to keep defining, and redefining, what better might mean.

But what does better mean to William James? A useful formulation can be found in James's educational writings. As noted in the last chapter, after publication of his groundbreaking *Principles of Psychology*, James emerged as something of an intellectual celebrity. His next move, notably, was to embark on a series of public lectures designed for school teachers. As Paul Stob has detailed, during the 1890s James delivered his "Talks to Teachers" lecture series dozens of times all over North America. The advertised purpose of these talks was to put academic psychology to classroom use. According to Stob, though, James's goal was nothing less than the redefinition of education and the role of the teacher for the new century. "Amid the upheavals of the modern world," Stob writes, James encouraged educators to "push the nation towards a better version of itself" (107). This "better version" was to emerge through shaping the intellectual habits of the nation's youth. As such, much of *Talks to Teachers*, is devoted to discussions of virtue and how it can be cultivated.<sup>2</sup> The result is a complex conception of the good.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marchetti is a young Italian pragmatist associated with the Università degli Studi di Milano. Interestingly, James has always been popular among Italian thinkers, starting with his mentorship of Giovanni Papini (see Simons).

<sup>2</sup> The series of lectures, with some additions, was published in 1899 as *Talks to Teachers About Psychology: and to Students About Some of Life's Ideals*.



As *Talks to Teachers* comes to a close, James describes the “ideal sort of mind,” the kind “that we should seek to cultivate in our pupils” (180). This ideal disposition is a mix of both tendencies to action and inhibitions. It’s both responsive to others and environment, and oddly stubborn. The ideal thinker, he writes, “with the reasons for [an] action, sees the reasons against it, and yet, instead of being palsied, acts in the way that takes the whole field into consideration” (180). As this indicates, James values the ability to trace consequences, to survey a complex scene and make judgements in the face of competing choices. This involves awareness of self and world, both in regard to what is and what could and should be.

Interestingly, for James, judgements take on increased moral weight when opposed by psychological forces. “The highest form of character,” he writes, “will be full of scruples and inhibitions,” but somehow “will succeed in energetically keeping on its way” (179). James rejects both the recklessness of the despot and the paralyzing self-consciousness of the melancholic. His ideal subject, we can say, is capable of both thought *and* action. But what of the relationship between the two? And how can we know a moral act? Elsewhere, as we’ll see, James addresses these problems in philosophical terms. Here he focuses on the psychological features of morality. “Reduced to its simplest and most elementary form,” James writes, a moral act “consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea which but for that effort of attention would be driven out of the mind” (187).<sup>3</sup> This description of the good is notable in two respects. First, it openly privileges conscious mental activity, what James calls “voluntary attention,” but what could be called “willpower.” Second, it demands that we “hold fast” to our ideas, which, at first blush, seems like a thoroughly *unpragmatic* notion. Pragmatism, remember, celebrates mediation, compromise, cognitive flexibility. In these lines James seems to suggest that morality equals the opposite.

The above tension is resolved if we recall that for James, ideas are conceived as thoroughly entwined with lived experience. He rejects any attempt to rule our lives “from above their contingencies,” as Marchetti writes. Instead, the ideas to which we must “hold fast” are those which emerge from interaction with our environment. They are human creations, the result of active inquiry. In any deliberative situation, James argues, the initial problem “is to find the right idea or conception for the case,” with rightness determined by consequence, evaluated per the thinker’s singular meaning-system (185). Once the right name is found, he suggests, it will play out its hand, leading to positive action. His principle intervention in *Talks* is to suggest that certain tendencies—both psychological and environmental—will inevitably drive us away from what we know (and feel) to be the best possible name,

---

<sup>3</sup> James here is drawing on his own assertion of free will, discussed in chapter four. Given the option to conceive of himself as either free or not free, he chose freedom as to reap the benefits such a conception would bring.

thus preventing the best possible action. Morality, as James presents it here, is a matter of recognizing this drift, and rejecting it. We must think broadly, think creatively, draft the best conceptions possible, and *stick with them*, come what may. If we do can this, the good will inevitably follow.

James illustrates this insight into the nature of morality with the example of a drunkard. When confronted with a whiskey bottle, this subject's "moral triumph or failure," James writes, "literally consists in his finding the right name for the case" (187). If he conceives of the situation as one in which he must "be social" or "not waste good liquor" he is physically and spiritually doomed (per his particular meaning-system). On the other hand, if he is able to label the situation one of "being a drunkard"—and stick with that label despite all forces to the contrary—"his feet are planted on the road to salvation" (188). While a "hackneyed" tale, as James admits, this example aptly illustrates the pragmatist conception of the relation between language and life. We name the world in order to achieve certain ends. And in a pluralistic universe—the universe described by James's radical empiricism—multiple descriptions are always possible. Morality, James suggests here, involves choosing wisely among our descriptive options. Language will then play out its hand.

So we must find the right name for the case. How can we do this though? How can we create better names and teach our students to do the same? My claim in the following pages is that if we move away from *Talks to Teachers* and into James larger oeuvre we can find something approaching an answer. For James, as we'll see, to draft the best descriptions we must be open to questioning and reworking. We must refuse to abide by any limit or form, and instead strive to feel the unfelt, to think the unthought. Cornel West writes that for James, the goal of philosophy "is to be more fully alive, more attuned to the possibilities of mystery, morality and melioration" (56). We think, in other words, to live fuller, to grow. I'd like to argue that this emphasis on growth—individual, social; intellectual, ethical, sensual—should guide composition. We can actualize such a vision, I'll suggest, by encouraging attention to both self and world, our thoughts and the things about which we think. By engaging what's "out there," we can make room for more of the world "in here," ultimately allowing us to think, write and act more creatively, more inclusively.

### 3.3 DIFFERENCE & ITS DISCONTENTS

I'm not alone in wishing to foreground ethics in rhetoric and composition. I'd like to examine some of this work, but first, a brief digression is in order. In chapter two, we saw how talk of "what is" in composition theory is currently dominated by thought positioned against the text-centric scholarship of the social turn. This text-centric scholarship can be understood as "postmodern" in that it is generally influenced by anti-foundational high theory (Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida, for example). Now, the ontology of such theory is under attack.

A similar backlash is underway in regard to ethics. The current trend in ethical theorizing, as we will see, is to write against core postmodern themes such as contingency, difference, self-conscious reflection and critique. As with my earlier discussion, the following pages will reveal that I am more sympathetic to postmodernism than most. Simply put, I believe that the ethical theory of that era gets a lot of things right. Chief among these is the postmodern demand for critical, self-aware inquiry. Gary Olson writes that in a world without agreed upon foundations (which like it or not, is the world we inhabit), "no longer can we conveniently rationalize our behavior by appealing to rules, rule books, priests, or philosophers" (45). Yes. This statement is both true and of great consequence. Simply put, we now have to judge our own actions, set our own rules. This means that self-conscious thought, real *thinking*, is more important than ever. Such a project, in such a space, as I see it, requires a good deal of humility. It requires the recognition of radical, incommensurate difference, as well as our own myopia in regard to that difference. The best postmodern thought acknowledges this. In that regard, as we will see, such thought resonates with the work of William James.<sup>4</sup>

\*\*\*

The most prominent contemporary voice on ethics and the teaching of writing is certainly John Duffy. In a series of influential journal articles, he has argued for renewed attention to composition as a positive social force. To clarify our mission in this regard, he suggests that the field look to Aristotelian virtue ethics. By drawing on the language of the virtues, he writes, both teachers and students can find "rationales for making ethical decisions in the writing class" (2017, 231).

---

<sup>4</sup> I am, of course, not the first to make the connection between pragmatism and postmodernism. As early as the 1970s, for example, Richard Rorty quipped that James (along with Dewey) could be found "waiting at the end of the road... Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling" (qtd. in Poirier 101).

Integrally, Duffy doesn't claim to be inventing anything new. As he sees it, both our classroom practice and the history of the discipline suggest that to teach writing is "always and already" to teach ethics. The cultivation of "ethical dispositions" in our students, he argues, is, in fact, our field's "prevailing disciplinary narrative and our teleological reason for being" (2014, 226). This is a bold claim. Indeed, some may reject the idea that composition, which rightfully prides itself on implicating a diverse array of theoretical traditions and institutional sites, can even have a "prevailing disciplinary narrative." Duffy argues that we can, we do, and that this narrative needs to be made clear. Specifically, he believes that composition, no matter where or how it is taught, necessarily promotes "communicative practices of honesty, accountability, compassion [and] intellectual courage" (2014, 213). He sees this as a much-needed social mission and one, which if better articulated, could raise the field's public profile.

Key to Duffy's claim is the idea that all writing instruction, no matter the pedagogical method or institutional venue, involves the teaching of certain traditional moral values. How can this be? Duffy ties it to the nature of the rhetorical act. Writing, like rhetoric in general, is a social activity, one which entails relations with other people and therefore, requires judgment as to the terms on which those relations will be conducted. As writing teachers, we teach students how to judge, how to decide what is appropriate given certain variables. This inevitably involves, according to Duffy, instruction in principles of honesty, accountability, etc. Together, these principles constitute the "rhetorical virtues... the traits, attitudes, and dispositions we associate with a good person, speaking or writing well" (2017, 235). The goal of Duffy's project is to help the field recognize the existence and social importance of these virtues.

Duffy makes a strong case. It is hard to argue with his claim that in our neoliberal age, "conceptions of civic good have been undermined by a corrosive, market-driven public discourse" (2014, 217). Likewise, I agree that composition should devote itself to combating this corrosion. Duffy, as we've seen, wants us to do this by emphasizing a traditional, community-derived form of morality. He sees unity among composition teachers (whatever pedagogy we profess we teach the rhetorical virtues, after all), and wants us to transmit a similar vision of common cause to our students. In this regard, he falls into that camp which resists postmodern values of contingency and difference. A sophisticated thinker, he recognizes that a return to "Platonic ideals of foundational truths" is neither possible nor desirable (2014, 218). Instead, by foregrounding the virtues, he hopes to expand composition's "ethical vocabulary," bringing forth the common good through talk of "connection, reciprocities, and interdependencies among peoples" (2014, 217). The goal of such talk is to turn students into models of "the good writer," a creature capable of sustaining "rhetorical friendships" (2017, 242).

It's flippant, but also accurate, to say that, basically, Duffy wants us to teach students to be nice. This is a noble goal. Unfortunately, I think it's also fatally short-sighted. The corrosive, market-driven public discourse we're up against has deep affective and material roots. It shapes the way people think,

feel and perceive the world. To combat it, we therefore need to reshape perception itself. Duffy's project doesn't provide for this.

At heart, my claim is that Duffy, while well-intentioned, remains too focused on the superficial features of discourse. He takes the way individuals talk as cause, rather than effect of larger cultural, political and material forces. To demonstrate what I mean, let's look at Duffy's example of the kind of discourse we want students to avoid. It's a Facebook comment from a congressional staffer. In a response to a constituent's claim regarding equal pay legislation, the staffer refers to the constituent, mockingly, as having "a little bee in his bonnet." He then goes on to suggest that his readers "hurl some acid" at certain female senators (qtd. in Duffy 2014, 209). Now, admittedly, that's not a very nice thing to say. As Duffy suggests, it provides an apt example of the rancor which characterizes contemporary civic discourse. We must consider, though, *why* this staffer would speak in such a manner. In chapter one, if you recall, I discussed the effects of group polarization, and the ways in which, within online filter bubbles, beliefs become both more homogenous and more extreme. In such environments, it's not surprising that language would also become more extreme. Immersed in his filter bubble, we can imagine, the staffer's beliefs have ossified; the desires of his interlocutors (immersed in their own bubbles) seem bizarre and perverse. In addition, within such spaces, there's a strong social incentives to attack opponents in the most cutting manner possible. Given this expanded notion of context, the staffer's language takes on new resonance. Rather than simply not being empathetic or kind, we see that he is, in fact, responding as the situation demands. Within the world the staffer inhabits, the constituent, with his perverse view on equal pay legislation, is the enemy. It would be illogical to try and sustain a "rhetorical friendship" with such a figure.

Duffy sees the above situation and believes that we need to put more effort into teaching codes of conduct. I believe that given the material reality writers and thinkers face, such a vision simply does not go far enough. It is unreasonable to expect a writer to act against his own best interests in the name of kindness. Instead, we need to change his perception of what his interests really are. The goal of an ethical writing pedagogy, in other words, should be to restructure that staffer's lifeworld, so that when he encounters the other in a Facebook forum, he is fascinated instead of repulsed. We need to make it so he longs to engage and be changed. A Jamesian ethical vision, centered on the notion of growth, allows us to cultivate this sort of subjectivity. It can lead to Duffy's much-desired rhetorical friendship, for sure. It doesn't frame such a relationship as a gift to the other, though. Instead, the opportunity for growth it provides is a gift to oneself.

\*\*\*

Laurie Grobman, in a pair of essays on multiculturalism and moral relativism, also examines ethics in the writing classroom.<sup>5</sup> Like Duffy, who praises her work, Grobman wants to foreground commonality rather than difference. She is particularly critical of what she sees as the postmodern relativism at the heart of many multicultural pedagogies. A widespread belief in “epistemological subjectivity,” she writes, has made students and teachers too hesitant to judge other people and cultures (2003, 206). There is a universally agreed upon set of human values, she argues, and actions and beliefs which contradict these values should be challenged. In turn, she promotes a vision of “just multiculturalism,” which privileges the ideal of “justice” over “tolerance or difference” (2002, 815). Just multiculturalism, she writes, “does not make the assumption that all differences are valuable and useful, but puts differences into view and subjects them to critical and ethical judgment” (2002, 837). This framework, she argues, gives writing teachers grounds to criticize, and teach their students to criticize, unjust cultural practices.

While, as we will see, I don’t agree with Grobman’s conclusions, I think her discussion of the relationship between knowledge and ethics is useful. Grobman clearly possesses the moral fervor which marks a good writing teacher. This is a teacher who clearly wants to do *good*, however that may be defined. Likewise, she should be praised for not being afraid to clearly state what she values. Unfortunately, her work is more concerned with justifying those values than understanding them. Her essay “Just Multiculturalism” is a particularly fascinating document in this regard. Here, we see a subject valiantly resisting the idea that her ideals are, at bottom, *her* ideals. Towards this end, she presents, and rejects, arguments by Charles Paine that values are ultimately personal, and by Patricia Bizzell that they are community-based. There’s actually quite a lot of pathos in the contradictions that plague Professor Grobman. She believes an instructor should be able to act on her personal beliefs, but not if they’re “reprehensible” (819). She believes students’ desires should be respected, but not if they’re “hateful” (819). To resolve this cognitive dissonance, Grobman takes what could be called the scientific route. Applying what she terms a “realist (moral) epistemology” (2003, 210), she argues that due to our species’ “common humanity” (827), something like an empirical definition of justice can be established. Ethical action is that which conforms to this standard. In her classroom, in turn, students work together to articulate such a standard, then think through specific cases, determining if acts are right or wrong based on the application of rules to situation (see Grobman “Postpositive Realism”).

---

<sup>5</sup> These essays are “‘Just Multiculturalism:’ Teaching Writing as Critical and Ethical Practice” (2002) and a more philosophically oriented companion piece, “Postpositivist Realism in the Multicultural Writing Classroom” (2003).

Right away, we can see why Grobman's approach would be amenable to Duffy. Duffy, remember, claims that writing instruction is united by a shared commitment to the "rhetorical virtues." Grobman goes a step further—claiming that all humans (or all decent humans anyway) are united by similar ideas about justice and that these ideas can be known, at least vaguely, and used as a guide for action. Now, Grobman doesn't claim that ethics is simply a matter of memorizing rules: she admits that "most moral standards remain both situational and contextual" (2003, 218). She is quite insistent though that certain hard and fast rules do exist.<sup>6</sup> Her whole project, in short, involves convincing students that through careful analysis, they can arrive in a position to make moral claims that are more than just opinion—if they look hard enough, they will be able to find objective, albeit socially derived truth and thus act accordingly. She sees this belief in moral certainty as necessary to overcome a "paralyzing relativism" that limits "cross-cultural understanding and ethical decision-making" (2003, 206).

For sure, Grobman's essay is of a certain moment, one in which combating limp, kumbaya multiculturalism was a major concern (see Olson, Pratt). That said, I think her analysis draws our attention to a topic of timeless import: in short, how should we approach objects of inquiry? Grobman is clear on this point. She believes that we should work out a set of rules and judge objects by their correspondence with those rules. Now, this position is not unreasonable; making sense of parts via wholes, small via large, has much philosophical precedent. As stated in previous chapters, though, empiricism—the tradition in which William James works—takes the opposite approach. It moves from parts to wholes, up from particulars, not down from rules. This analytical method demands attention to differences as well as commonalities, along with a certain mental flexibility. We have to recognize that concepts (the rules by which we understand) are only general guidelines and are always subject to revision.

Now, like me, Grobman wants her students to pay attention to detail. They must learn "the appropriate rules and general [moral] principles," she writes, and also the "sensibility it takes to ground such principles in real social and historical contexts" (2003, 217). I believe though that her top-down approach stands in the way of such sensibility. It radically reduces her students' ability to cultivate new lines of thought and story, and hence to see, feel and understand.

Grobman writes of an assignment in which students research then pass judgment upon the case of Elian Gonzalez (a Cuban boy held in the United States against the wishes of his father). One student, Sharon, uses the "moral principle of parental rights," a supposed "transcultural value," to decide the case

---

<sup>6</sup> I will not challenge Grobman's claim that pretty-much universal standards of conduct could be articulated ("don't kill without a good reason," seems to be one). My claim is simply that such rules are so abstract as to be worthless. It should also be noted how conservative Grobman's vision of morality is—if our only concern is enforcing norms, rather than thinking new, better ways of being, how could society ever progress?

(2003, 212). Her essay, in turn, betrays the single-mindedness of a provincial magistrate. “The child has a right to be with his father... It is universally unethical to withhold custody of Elian,” she concludes, thus the “United States is the wrong one in this situation” (2003, 213). Although, like Grobman, I am pleased to see a student take a stand on an issue of national importance, Sharon’s claim presupposes a myopia which her teacher fails to complicate (or perhaps even realize). Who is speaking here? Why? What information does she have to overlook in order to make her ruling? Yes, the application of a rule simplifies the situation and allows for a solution. But it also demands a radical contraction of potential meanings. Following William James, I would prefer that Sharon open up new lines of meaning, that she complicate her object of study—and her own relation to it—even if that limits her ability to act as magistrate. This sort of complication, I believe, is how we come to understand (more). It’s how we grow.

### **3.4 ETHICS AS A MODE OF QUESTIONING**

So far I’ve reviewed the work of two thinkers who challenge postmodern ideas about what is and what is good. Both Duffy and Grobman stress commonality. In doing so, they elide engagement with that which is radically, uncognizably other. From my perspective, this is a mistake. Rather than being a dismissible inconvenience, I’d argue that otherness defines our lifeworld. The depth of this otherness can be glimpsed if we take a moment to consider the nature of cognition. Like James, I believe that cognition arises from the material construction of the cognizing being. As James writes (albeit in a slightly different context), “spirit” is always “at the mercy of bodily happenings” (BC 5). All bodies, of course, are singular, with each tracing a different path through time and space. The result, given any stimuli, is a innumerable array of interpretations, myriad manifestations of spirit. The composition of distant galaxies, the machinations of capital: these things are unknowable (or more precisely, infinitely knowable). The same can be said of the thoughts and feelings of our friends and lovers. In all areas of life, in other words, if one takes a hard materialist line, what we know can only be said to mask the vast, roiling expanse of what we don’t (and can’t).

Of course, visions of preternatural unity provide emotional support. Ultimately, though, I think they’re self-defeating. To achieve the good in any meaningful sense we must work together, which requires, at least to some degree, thinking together. But how do we do this? James’s project suggests that



close attention to the other and the object is key, as is the recognition of the limits of our ability to know (and feel) that to which we attend. Commonality, in short, is made, not given, and most often made through surrender. Postmodern discussions of ethics in rhetoric and composition are useful because they allow for surrender. By emphasizing self-awareness and the contextual nature of all knowledge, they hint at a blueprint for moral action in a pluralistic universe.

Perhaps the definitive statement of postmodern ethics in the writing classroom is James Porter's 1993 essay, "Developing a Postmodern Ethics of Rhetoric and Composition." Here, Porter acknowledges the unavailability of universal ethical principles (the "common humanity" sought by Duffy and Grobman), but unlike some, doesn't see this as freeing us from ethical responsibility. The key, according to Porter, is to understand ethics not as "a set of answers, but a mode of questioning" (219). The good is always a process. It implicates ideals (Grobman's "justice," for example), but those ideals are always understood as arising out of, and returning to, local circumstances. Porter characterizes this ongoing merger of thought and thing, theory and practice, as "praxis" and claims that it "represents a new kind of critical positioning. It is practice, conscious of itself" (220).

Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter, in 1998's *Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition*, expand on Porter's vision of ethics as a "mode of questioning." Though concerned with consequences, they note that ethics-as-process doesn't seek predetermined outcomes. Instead it encourages consideration and reflection, the goal being for the thinker, every thinker, "to see what may not have been seen before, to resist complacency and reconsider what had, heretofore, seemed acceptable" (4). This (re)vision requires a degree of self-consciousness and even self-doubt—we must engage in "continuous, on-going scrutiny of our motives and methods" (4). Even then, nothing is guaranteed. Postmodern ethics does not offer guarantees. Instead, it merely helps the thinker better understand and work upon her own singular situation. As Fontaine and Hunter phrase it, ethical inquiry in the postmodern mode acts to "clarify, diagnose, and structure situations" (7). What the thinker does next is up to her.

Taken together, we can say that postmodern thought presents ethics as a way of being, as a critical, self-aware habit of mind. Instead of giving subjects a pre-made concept such as "kindness" or "justice" to guide their actions, it asks that they consider, and reconsider, each action in light of its singular circumstances. Context is the key term here. Postmodern ethics doesn't assume commonality, other than the fact that every actor must act within a specific, delimited space and time (a specific context). As such, every thought or action demands negotiation. When John Duffy writes an essay, for example, there's no escaping his background, his body, his highest ideals and most perverse vices. The key to a context-dependent ethical scheme is the recognition that it is from the convergence of these variables, rather than any a priori obligation, that duty arises. In the rhetorical act, indeed every act, the

“drive to obligation and action,” Porter writes, “derives from community... from a ‘local we’” (217). Attention to this we, and attunement to its demands, is thus the basis of morality.

The connection between the above thinkers and William James now comes into view. James, remember, asks that we survey the whole field in order to find the right name for the case. Attention to context is key in this formulation. The “right name” is always singular: it arises out of the specific dynamics of the field to which it is to work upon.<sup>7</sup> *Attunement*, we can say, is the process by which name and field come into alignment. In the case of the drunkard, for example, the concept of “being a drunkard” only derives meaning from the specifics of his lived experience. And it is through attunement to that lived experience—the drunkard’s body, background, highest ideals and most perverse vices—that the idea of “being a drunken” can be formulated. With James, as with the postmodern compositionists, attunement thus emerges as an ethical imperative.

Louise Wetherbee Phelps, in her under-appreciated book, *Composition As a Human Science*, provides additional insight into the relationship between context and ethics. Writing at the height of the postmodern moment, Phelps draws on two pragmatists—John Dewey and Stephen Pepper—to present human subjectivity as an “open system, constantly evolving through the exchange of energies with the world” (34). As this line indicates, there’s an ecological element to Phelps’s analysis: actors draw from the tissue of context, but also redraw that tissue. They name the world, but in doing so, act upon the world in ways that change the names which must be assigned. Attunement, in other words, is always ongoing.

In a line of thinking with which James, a Darwinian natural scientist, would agree, Phelps argues that an ecological perspective radically redefines the relationship between thinker and thought. From such a perspective, the tools of understanding—reason, rationality, the senses—are seen as provided by the world as opposed to existing apart from it. Reason is communal, rationality dialogical; they arise in time and space, from specific, delimited interactions. This focus on the relational and situated, Phelps argues, lays the groundwork for a non-foundational ethical agenda. An invigorated notion of context, she writes, echoing James Porter, “represents the precise counterpart (as God-term) to the discredited ideals of an autonomous, context-free authority” (30). Shared attention to the local, in other words, provides for the possibility of shared meaning. It allows for negotiation between what were once autonomous perspectives.

As perhaps is apparent, the good as described by Porter, Fontaine and Hunter, and Phelps is quite amendable to composition as I have defined it. The goal of composition in the face of the hegemony of

---

<sup>7</sup> Different situations will often be given what is technically the same name, of course. Many singular situations have been named “being a drunkard,” for example.

the fragments, remember, should be to allow for more expansive, more inclusive acts of meaning-making. My claim is that ethics as a mode of questioning can spur such activity. By refusing to treat thought as determined in advance, it demands respect for and attunement to the absolute singularity of every situation. Moral imperialism, we can say, is countered with strict intellectual and sensual responsibility. The ethical subject, according to this view, must check and recheck, feel and refeel, constantly searching for what they might have missed. They must name the world, but can never rest assured in any particular name. Such a demand encourages writers not just to find the right name for the case, but to keep coming up with new and better names. This is meaning-making. And it's how we counter the hegemony of the fragments.

### 3.5 A POST-CRITICAL COMPOSITION?

In the previous section I identified what could be termed a postmodern ethics for rhetoric and composition. This vision of the ethical, as enacted by scholars associated with composition's discourse-centric social turn, presents the good as a critical, self-aware habit of mind. Not surprisingly, with the more recent material turn this view has been challenged. Though, as noted, I am an adamant materialist, I believe that the insights of the social turn must be respected. To follow William James is to acknowledge the importance of matter, affect and the "vague and inarticulate." At the same time, though, James is clear that the purpose of recognizing and engaging such forces is self-definition, not self-effacement.<sup>8</sup> We think, write and act in order to grow, to expand self and sensibility. To do this, we must learn to trace our boundaries, as to challenge, and ultimately exceed them. This process inevitably involves active thought—as in conscious, critical, often traumatic thought. Many new materialists feel differently. They view thought as a barrier to connection, rather than its precondition.

Stephen Rowe makes visible the tension between the dominant new materialist position and my own Jamesian-inspired view. In exploring the vitalism at the heart of James's work, he notes what appears to be two conflicting demands. On one hand, to live life to its fullest, James indicates that we must utterly submit to lived experience. We must "renounce entirely our efforts at control," Rowe writes (18). True submission, though, quickly reveals that as embodied humans we must choose, we must act.

---

<sup>8</sup> We must define ourselves as to affect that realm in which the impact can be the most felt (our lived experience).

So, as Rowe sees it, to “let go,” paradoxically, forces us to more fully embrace our constructive, creative powers. My claim, in short, is that most new materialists only ride this train halfway. In their efforts to put humans, birds and bricks on the same level, they renounce human control. This is fine. They fail to take the next step, though, and embrace their role as active agents. In exalting the agency of a brick, say, new connections between the world’s varied elements are forged. These connections weren’t there beforehand, though. Instead, they were created by interested, willful human actors. The more aware these actors are of their creative function, I believe, the better.

As noted, many new materialists would take issue with James’s privileging of the constructive power of human thought. Casey Boyle provides a good example. In line with the dominant rhet-comp ethos, he privileges, above all else, notions of the “codependence” among human and nonhumans. Towards this end, he forwards a vision of “rhetoric as posthuman practice.” Such a rhetoric, he writes, uses “repetitions to become attuned to and help foster the... rhythms, and relays that emerge across different media ecologies” (543). Language in such a scheme becomes a means of “generating and sustaining dispositions,” rather than gaining active awareness of self, object or other (549). There’s no need to know what you are doing or why. There’s no need to identify the ideals your practice serves (other than the ideal of oneness). In such a scheme, in fact, metacognition and reflection—hallmarks of postmodern ethics—“have the potential to become bad habits,” as they may encourage a writer “to separate herself from all those things with which she is codependent” (533). Thinking too much, in other words, might make one forget that he is not a tree or mobile phone. Boyle sees this as placing the writer on dubious ethical grounds.

Critique, a term privileged by social-epistemic scholars like Berlin, Bizzell and Bartholomae, has also been challenged. Boyle’s new materialist allies, Paul Lynch and Nathaniel Rivers, for example, writing in response to the “critical materialism” discussed in chapter one, claim that pedagogies based on critique—on tracing the often unseen impacts of texts and other social creations—risk training students to “mistrust the very tools” of social improvement (585). Instead of studying the way thought or language can mislead, Lynch and Rivers want inquiry into *things*. Every situation, they argue, is made up of equally real, equally important, and more or less accessible forces. They argue for a writing pedagogy which traces these forces through quasi-scientific inquiry. The ethical imperative at play, as with Boyle, is to promote a greater sense of connection between writer and world.

I don’t want to completely dismiss the above arguments. Overall, our positions have much in common. I am in complete agreement with Boyle, for example, as to the importance of the unknown (and unknowable) in the composition and reception of texts. Likewise, his description of “current critical rhetoric,” which uses reflection solely as a means to identify exploitable power relations, seems both alien and undesirable (536). As for Lynch and Rivers, influenced by Bruno Latour—a self-proclaimed admirer

of William James—they are fellow empiricists. They are certainly right to urge attention to the parts, to the details. That said, I think that these scholars’ attacks on self-reflective, critical inquiry are largely unfounded. First, like Bizzell or Bartholomae (or James, for that matter), I think a bit of mistrust for our tools is not only healthy, but desperately needed. As discussed in chapter one, currently, those tools (particularly digital technologies) are radically restricting our ability to comprehend and communicate. It is only through critique—through the self-conscious, creative identification of hows and whys—that we can begin to come to terms with this phenomenon. Now, to be clear, I don’t promote any theoretical method which purports to reveal one true reality, hidden or otherwise. Similarly, as my discussion of Grobman demonstrates, I reject top-down critical approaches. That said, we must question. And this often involves abstracting up and away from the specific to create higher orders of explanation. The suggestion that there is more than meets the eye—that thought and language and perception may not be honest brokers—is valuable, I believe, because it sustains this sort of movement.

Phelps, for one, agrees with me. As she sees it, critical analysis, and the attunement to context it engenders, can help overcome the isolation occasioned by radical plurality. Questioning what appears to be, Phelps writes, “helps us to identify . . . limits to reason, meaning, and community insofar as they constantly impose themselves” on our constructive efforts (34). Critique, in other words, works to disrupt and detotalize truth claims. We can thus generate new, more widely shared truths.<sup>9</sup>

As Phelps’s analysis implies, critique has important moral implications. James hints at this when he writes that the ideal thinker must be able to “take the whole field into consideration.” To highlight exactly what’s at stake, though, I’d like to turn to another source: Hannah Arendt. This may seem like an odd choice. I think, though, that Arendt, perhaps better than any other philosopher, successfully elucidates the nexus between morality and critical thought. As such, she sheds light on the belief system under which both William James and many postmoderns labor. She also shows that the critical impulse is part of a long tradition that cannot be easily dismissed.

Arendt hits upon the moral implications of critical thought in her influential lecture, “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” Here, following Kant, she draws a distinction between knowing and thinking. The former, she writes, involves the mapping of our world. It is cumulative, leaving behind a “growing treasure of knowledge” (421). Thinking, on the other hand, just is. It is “the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results” (416). It has no purpose (other than the act of thinking itself) and is driven by a

---

<sup>9</sup> In describing the community building function of critical thought, Hannah Arendt, discussed below, writes that such thought “has roused you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive,” but, at the same time, revealed that “you have nothing in your hand but perplexities, and the most we can do with them is share them with each other” (434). Translation: to lose our old names means we must band together to draft new ones.

desire that knows no limit or satiation point. “The need to think,” Arendt writes, “can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will [satisfy] this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew” (422).

As we’ve seen, Boyle values discursive production—the fostering of “repetitions, rhythms and relays”—over any sort of cognitive activity. Lynch and Rivers also value production. What cognitive activity they do encourage, it seems to me, is more akin to knowing than thinking. They cite Bruno Latour’s book *Aramis* as an example of their method. Here, Latour “works to add to reality by counting up all the actants” involved with the failed construction of a new train system (584). This is an interesting project; it increases one’s “treasure of knowledge.” But does it make students more inclined to *think*?

This question is essential, because, as Arendt sees it, thinking is directly tied to morality. Specifically, she traces a connection between consciousness and the conscience, seeing in the former the distancing from self which allows for the latter. Observing Adolf Eichmann on trial in Jerusalem, she finds him utterly unable to think. Eichmann, she writes, had little trouble transitioning from Nazi functionary to prominent war criminal: he passively accepted this new value system “as though it were nothing but another language rule” (417). The invocation of linguistic habits is key here. According to Arendt, Eichmann lived by clichés, stock phrases and standardized codes of expression. Educated and articulate, he could no doubt use these to foster rhythms and repetitions among his fellow Nazis. Likewise, he could know his world in positive terms—perhaps he could trace all the actants that made up the German train system. Being unable to think, though, he had no ability to challenge or change the discourse in which he moved. Thinking, Arendt writes, “brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them,” allowing us to conceptualize our world in new and better ways (445). Eichmann’s opinions remained unexamined. He was thus a useful cog in the Nazi machine.

Arendt’s discussion of the relationship between critical thought and morality directly relates to composition as an ethical enterprise. As we’ve seen, ethics in the postmodern sense is relentlessly reflective. It calls into question not just what we think about (trains, Trump), but the very tools with which we think (words, concepts, our senses). In this way it is “thinking” in its purest form. To think, Arendt writes, is to unfreeze “what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought” (417). Throughout the best composition pedagogies, I’d argue, we see attempts at this sort of cognitive defrosting. It often begins when we question language, what it does and what it hides. Bartholomae, for example, demands that we ask “questions of the discourse as a discourse” (2005 341). Who benefits, for example, when missionary work on St. Croix is characterized as “charity”? What are the consequences of the ways in which we write and think? This is critique. Eichmann was unable to perform such analysis. I’m afraid that some new materialist pedagogies, by failing to challenge thought and language, may be putting students in a similar position.

### 3.6 EMBRACING THE EXCESS: COMPOSITION'S ETHICS OF ATTUNEMENT

The previous section argued that there can be no post-critical composition. In the face of the hegemony of the fragments our field must encourage more expansive acts of meaning-making. And meaning, as we've seen, can only arise from attunement to context. Now, many new materialist thinkers would concur. They fail to realize, though, that attunement has both constructive *and* destructive aspects. In its constructive guise, attunement allows for the creation of new names. In its destructive form, attunement does away with old names. When attunement does this latter work, when it disrupts ossified thought structures, it is intimately tied to thinking—the unfreezing of thought—and to critique.

As noted, I believe that composition in the postmodern, social-epistemic vein should be praised for encouraging critical thought. All told, though, I agree with Boyle, and Lynch and Rivers that a break with the social-epistemic is needed. As argued in previous chapters, by remaining fixated on the text, such thought is unable to theorize the affective, material and uncognizable—essential elements of the human experience. Context is key. And context is always more than just text.

Likewise, ethics is always more than just mind. My use of term *attunement* to describe the process by which we name the world gestures towards this fact. Within rhetoric and composition, this term is most often used by those who study sound. Attunement, the process of “attending to tonality,” Matthew Heard writes “describes a complex process of moving, flexing, reading, and responding” (49). So *attunement* implies holism. For me, it carries resonances of interpretation and creation, of the cognitive, along with the physical and the affective. Consider the act of singing. To match the tone of the other members of a choir, say, we must listen, then act, listen, then act, in a series of incremental adjustments. This process of adaptation involves both conceptual knowledge (am I sharp or flat?) and tacit or bodily knowledge (does this note feel right?). It involves simultaneous reception and production. And by necessity it involves sociality, embeddedness, the existence of an other with which to attune. In deploying this term, I'm suggesting that a similar mix of variables holds whenever we attempt to find the right name for the case.

Though I respect attunement's prior usage, I admit I am somewhat expanding the concept. It seems to me that as used in sound studies, attunement implies a certain passivity. As I use the term, attunement is anything but passive. Naming the world is by definition a conscious, willful, always-interested human activity. The attuned writer-thinker never acts alone, however, and is never stable or in stasis. “An *ethos* of attunement,” Heard writes, “subjects us to the stretching and breaking of our most familiar and comfortable habits of listening” (54). Yes. And this stretching and breaking, James would say, always involves interaction, relation but also a certain striving, even an acquisitiveness. We name

and rename because we want to know more, to feel more, to expand the self. In this sense, attunement, as I use the term, involves “prolonged dwelling within,” as Heard writes, but also active motion (46).

But what exactly are we moving towards? To what are we supposed to attend when we try to find the right name for the case? In answering these questions we approach the ethical imperative at the heart of an ethics of attunement. As noted, for James, words, names, concepts—though valuable—are always partial; they are clean and neat, and inevitably elide more than they mark. Within the world of lived experience, though, the opposite situation pertains. This world is defined by *more*. Simply by virtue of being alive, the thinking-feeling body, and whatever names it may draft, are constantly overwhelmed by the excess which is the object and the other. “Nature,” James writes, “is but a name for excess; every point of her opens and runs into the more” (PU 116). As a result of this excess, lived experience, as James conceives it, is a space of radical potential. In any given moment, we have the ability to expand our discourse and our selves, to come to know and care for more of the world. The ultimate moral act, for James, is to exercise this ability.

“Every bit of us at every moment,” James writes, “is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possible not yet in our present sight” (PU 117). In these lines, we once again see the great intimacy James posits between self and world. Within lived experience, the actual sits side-by-side with the possible. Our goal should be to engage in thought and action which unlocks the latter, makes real some tiny part of that “wider self” inherent in every moment. To do this, we must find ways of opening our selves to that which surrounds and threatens to engulf us. Of course, what sort of action this might entail depends on our individual circumstances. Here again though, I’d suggest, we find hints of the paradox noted earlier: to grow, to unlock wider selves, we must submit.

James’s ethics of submission resonates with the vision of morality presented by various continental philosophers (see Bauman; Levinas). Within rhetoric and composition, this stain of thinking is best represented by Diane Davis. In *Breaking Up (at) Totality*, Davis argues for the embrace of the unknowable. Echoing James, she writes that “the universe will forever overflow our superimposed categories and distinctions,” and as such, we must learn to cherish “the unstructurable excess” (57). Davis views this excess as generative. There is no inscription without exscription; the “is” is always defined by the “is not.” From this idea, she derives a moral imperative. Ethics “in a world that has lost its criteria for responsible action,” she writes, “begins with straining to hear the excess” (19).

So Davis argues for the encounter. To encounter does not necessarily mean to understand, though. Instead, the goal, in a world of uncognizable difference, must be “a constant straining toward and attending to the other,” in order to “bear constant witness to understanding’s withdrawal” (Davis 243). Here again, we see attunement in its negative guise. To acknowledge the presence of the uncognizable is



to recognize that our names are insufficient. No matter how well-spoken, the reality of overflow, of excess, reminds us that we can't rest. Excess disrupts all conceptualization—identities, ideologies, names—and, in turn, demands the construction of more expansive worlds.

More than any composition project I know of, *Breaking Up* captures the impulse behind William James's ethical vision. Simply put, both Davis and James demand *growth through encounter*. We must find ways to engage the object and the other, they suggest, not to change it, but to be changed. The critical-ethical impulse elucidated in the previous two sections is key here: while in the world we must constantly push against the thought and language we use to define it. Questioning and self-awareness alone are not sufficient, though. We also need excess, the other, that which we can't conceptualize. When we question, and encounter, we grow. Like kudzu vines on a fence.

The outline of the ethical vision I propose now comes into view. An ethics of attunement, is an ethics of excess, an ethics of approach. It combines the postmodern tradition of self-examination, the continental tradition of the encounter, and a strong material element. The material world, as William James makes clear, is rich and wild, unknowable and endlessly knowable. Through attunement to its vagaries our conceptual schemes can (and will) be disrupted, allowing (in fact, demanding) the construction of new, more expansive meanings.

As I see it, an ethics of attunement holds that the good—in life or the writing act—involves a dual motion: outward towards the object and the other, and inward towards the self. It demands submission, but recognizes that submission is an act of will. Behavior-wise, such an ethics presents as a readiness to question, compare, reflect and consider. Rather than law, it privileges openness and cognitive flexibility, with the goal being to fully inhabit, in both body and mind, the (ever-changing) context in which one thinks, writes and acts. William James provides a model of this way of being. He makes real the ethics, which up only this point, we have engaged only in the abstract.

### 3.7 ON A CERTAIN BLINDNESS IN HUMAN BEINGS

Over his long career, William James often discussed the nature of ethics and the ethical life. Earlier, we saw how in *Talks to Teachers*, he urges us to “find the right name for the case,” and to “hold fast” to that idea, despite internal and external resistance. As noted, this can be understood as James's “psychological” articulation of morality. I'd now like to examine his literary and philosophical

articulations. The former finds its fullest manifestation in his essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” published as a supplement to the 1899 book version of *Talks to Teachers*. Composed of long passages from literary works, interspersed with personal vignettes, “On a Certain Blindness” is an odd little essay. It’s important, though. In the introduction to *Talks to Teachers* James notes that while, to some readers, the essay may seem a “mere piece of sentimentalism,” it in fact, “connects itself with a definite view of the world and of our moral relations to the same” (v). The view of the world he refers to is pluralism, sustained by radical empiricism. According to James, this philosophy holds that “the truth is too great for any one actual mind.... The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in” (v). “On a Certain Blindness” seeks to illustrate this state of affairs, and show how, within a world of radical difference and limited knowledge, ethical action remains possible.

James begins by acknowledging the difficulties humans face in thinking, or feeling, outside ourselves. We are “practical beings,” he writes, captivated by our own interests (4). This leads to “stupidity” and “injustice,” so far as our opinions “deal with the significance of alien lives” (4). For James, these “alien lives” are lead not just by humans. He laments, for example, his insensibility to “the rapture of bones under hedges,” that his fox terrier must experience (5). This sense of rapture is of the greatest possible significance, because for James, passion—the inchoate flow of energy between disparate entities—is the source of all value. Wherever it is found, he writes, “there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there *is* ‘importance’ in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be” (10). In these lines we see, rather than the nihilism typically associated with a “relativism,” a radical multiplication of meaning(s). The world, for James, is wildly varied, and utterly disparate, but also capable of an infinite number of meaningful connections. Dog for bone, Jack for Jill, settler for muddy homestead: if vital, each merger is of value, and demanding of respect.

So given a world of infinite meanings, most of which we can’t access, what should we do? James offers two solutions: one in the form of the “verbal formulas” in which philosophers traffic and one more obscure, the half-seen truth of the artist or mystic.<sup>10</sup> The first is found in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” a lecture to the Yale Philosophy Club from 1891. Here, James, like the postmoderns, acknowledges that no ethics can be established in advance. Meaning, remember, is always singular, always defined by context. Given this state of affairs, he determines that “the essence of the good is simply to satisfy demand” (201). As I read it, this claim is both utilitarian (implicating the greatest good for the greatest number) and radically selfless. James’s ideal moral subject, it could be said, is a philosopher rather than a partisan. Instead of demanding her own ideals be realized, she attempts to create a world in which all ideals, even those opposed to her own, can be realized.

---

<sup>10</sup> These are what I have labeled his philosophical and literary articulations of morality, respectively.

“The various ideals,” James further explains, “have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals” (201). Each represents a claim on the object and the other, which, in a world of infinite potential meanings, gives rise to an obligation. Ethical action, therefore, at its most basic, is simply that which works to satisfy as many claims as possible. The “best name” is that which allows for such action. Again, this naming requires active human inquiry. We must survey the field, listen carefully. Against external and internal forces (our own tendency towards moral imperialism, for example) we must not “rule out any ideal from being heard” (203). The ultimate goal, James writes, is to strive for a “more inclusive order,” driven by the recognition that the highest ethical life, “consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case” (209).

The ethics James presents in a “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” is admirably egalitarian. Ultimately though, it remains a verbal formula. Within the chaotic world of lived experience, how can we overcome our blindness and moral imperialism? What force works to shatter “rules... grown too narrow for the actual case?”

In *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Richard Poirier provides a useful lens through which to read James. As discussed in chapter two, Poirier sees the pragmatist tradition, starting with Ralph Waldo Emerson, as marked by both a deep “linguistic skepticism,” as well as a perpetual desire to overcome this skepticism (11). Emerson, Poirier finds, does this by moving beyond language-as-representation. Instead of merely describing his experience, or the way in which language fails to capture that experience, he lets his sentences reveal how words themselves resist his attempts at original thought. Emerson’s deployment of the “vague” and “superfluous,” Poirier claims, “enacts the struggles by which he tries to keep his own language from becoming ‘faked,’” as in clichéd or mere remnants of “previous human thinking” (27).

Though Poirier doesn’t make the connection, “On a Certain Blindness” enacts a similar sort of dramatic performance. As noted, this essay is very odd structurally, consisting of long quotations from other authors (Robert Louis Stevenson, Wordsworth, Whitman), interspersed with small bits of commentary. In this regard, the text performs the very decentering of self James’s ethical vision demands. Remember, according to his radically pluralistic vision, “the facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in” (TT v). This essay puts such a belief into practice. Rather than trying to capture truth in a single narrative, James juxtaposes multiple narratives in a sort of textual collage. In this indirect, impressionistic method we see the same “vagueness” Poirier identifies in Emerson. In both cases, I would argue, the goal is to overcome the limitations of the available discourse, to convey

something beyond what is available via the tools of “previous human thinking.” Whether James successfully does this is up for debate.<sup>11</sup> But what lessons should we draw from his performance?

First off, we must respect the encounter. James demonstrates as much. Journeying in the North Carolina woods, he comes across a dilapidated farmstead, an “ulcer” in the natural landscape, as he describes it. Disgusted at first, after speaking with a mountaineer, he realizes he “had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation” (8). That which to him was a mere “ugly picture on the retina,” to the settlers who cultivated the land, “sang a very paean of duty, struggle, and success” (9). In this realization, he comes to acknowledge and respect the claim which the settlers’ ideals make upon him. Though exposure to alterity, through an *encounter*, his previously narrow conceptual scheme expands, along with his ethical horizon. In short, he finds a better name for the case.

Later in the essay, James describes the same base process, multiplied in intensity. He writes of those moments in which one is able to transcend “deadness towards all but one particular kind of joy” (17). Such moments are rare, he notes, but open to those who assume the pose of dreamer, philosopher, poet or lover. They occur when one captures the “mystic sense of hidden meaning” in the other or the object (20). He references, as an example of the latter, a passage from the novel *Obermann* in which a man falls in love with a jonquil. No matter the object of the loving gaze, he writes, these moments are of the greatest (moral) import. It is then, James writes, that

the hard externality give way, and a gleam of insight into the ejective world... the vast world of inner life beyond us, so different from that of outer seeming, illuminate our mind. Then the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found (16).

In these lines we see the wonderfully disruptive power of excess. We see an intense form of relation in which the elements in the equation (self and world) are redefined. Poirier, echoing Marchetti, writes that James’s displays a fierce opposition to the “calculated superimpositions of form” (43). Here, this iconoclastic tendency is on full display. James celebrates the destruction of all conceptual schemes, all clichés and dead letters, even those which define the self. He celebrates, in short, the destructive aspect of attunement. Behind this, I see, as Poirier sees in Emerson, a deep optimism, an abiding faith in human potential. For the self to be riven is a great accomplishment, because the new self, “the new centre and new perspective” which such a break necessitates, is bound to be better adapted to the world in which it

---

<sup>11</sup> As noted, in the introduction to *Talks to Teachers* James questions the effectiveness of this piece, writing “I wish I were able to make [the essay] more impressive” (v).

dwells, its interests less narrow, its perspective more inclusive. When our meanings are shattered, we are forced to draft better names, create forms more responsive to life.

Though, as noted, James refuses to issue any recipe for liberation (such a recipe would, of course, be the sort of formal mandate he opposes), he does indicate from what source such liberation must arise. In short, *sensation* disrupts form. As we've seen, to be life-affirming, our language and thought must remain flexible, responsive to lived experience. As James sees it though, industrial society impedes such responsiveness. In a world of culture and edification, we are "stuffed full with abstract conceptions, and [made] glib with verbalities and verbosities" (38). The result is alienation, both from our bodies and each other, for it is, of course, the most elementary of joys, "seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring and doing with one's body," in which we could share (38).

How can we remedy such alienation? Referencing nature and the "pure savage... nearly on the level, mentally, with the wild animals," James argues that we must "descend to a more primitive and profound level" (44,38). We must somehow touch that which lies beyond thought. Of course, as discussed in chapter two, we can never escape the conceptual realm altogether. For the conscious, adult human, experience is always shot through with language. In even our most private moments, we must rely on public forms, on the remnants of previous human thinking, as Poirier says. James makes it clear though that we are in no way doomed or trapped by these forms. Though careful attention to that which lies beyond our narrow interests, we can catch "a gleam of insight into the ejective world," and thus reshape and (re)vitalize our thought and language. We can turn the actual into the potential, come to know and feel more. This disruptive expansion of self and world constitutes the core of an ethics of attunement.

### 3.8 ACTUALIZING THE EXCESS

In the above section we saw an ethics of attunement in action. In "On a Certain Blindness," James connects various bits of experience— texts, ideas and life events—to create a synthesis which exceeds the sum of its parts. He leverages the world's innate excess, in other words, to invigorate his thought and story. Diane Davis claims that to harness the excess, writing must resist mastery and closure. It must "hold the door open" on one's ideas, refusing to shut out the unknown and thus end the

conversation (2001 141).<sup>12</sup> Through his essay's unique patchwork-style, James accomplishes this feat. In doing so, he challenges his reader to rethink their place in the world. With this sort of provocation in mind, I'd like to close by examining how James's ethical thought—especially as displayed in “On a Certain Blindness”—can inform classroom practice.

As noted in chapter one, I teach freshman writing at a large, fairly exclusive public university. In the fall of 2016, I designed and taught a course—titled “Sense and Sensation”—based on Jamesian principles. The goal of this course was simple: to help students improve their writing. From a Jamesian perspective though, as I hope I've made clear, word cannot be separated from world. This means that though our putative subject was writing, the course also implicated perception and that which we perceive. A Jamesian mode of writing instruction, we can say, like certain British surnames, must be double-barreled—it must engage students both on and off the page. In chapter five, I will go into detail regarding my students' essay writing. Here, I'd like to discuss how we work with the space beyond the page.

In the previous chapter I argued that for James, meaning-making involves connecting bits of raw experience to create more complex and expansive webs. The bottom up nature of this process is essential. An empiricist like James, remember, rather than imposing a certain form on experience, takes parts and makes wholes. He or she starts with the local—what we see and hear and feel—and works from there. On a number of levels, my course is structured to encourage this sort of movement. The sequence of essay prompts, for example, starts with personal narrative and then moves through more and more expansive research assignments—all while focused on the same topic. This sequence encourages students to ground their later, broader claims, within lived experience. Equally important though, we don't immediately leap into the conceptual clouds. Instead, before my students begin to make meaning through essay writing, they attend to the tools of meaning-making: specifically, their own minds and bodies, and how these entities make sense of the world.

As we've seen, the material world for William James is infinitely rich, infinitely varied. Embodied individuals abstract from this flux, thus bringing order to chaos; but the order created is always interested, always limited. In the abstract, these ideas may sound academic, esoteric. I believe though, that when internalized, the implications can be profound. To recognize that all knowledge is made is to deny any claim to pure truth or unmediated reality. It is to acknowledge, at least implicitly, that ideas are just tools, to be picked up and discarded at will. In short, as I see it, acceptance of these basic

---

<sup>12</sup> Here we find the mirror image of the magisterial brand of student writing for which Laurie Grobman advocates Davis wants students listening and learning, not issuing rulings.

metaphysical premises pave the way for radically expanded acts of meaning-making. They allow for growth of self and world.

So the first step in a Jamesian writing pedagogy is to reorientate students towards their own perception. How can we do this? One way is through course readings. My students, for example, read James's "On a Certain Blindness," as well as Martin Heidegger's "Memorial Address" and Audre Lorde "Uses of the Erotic." All of these texts, in one way or another, draw attention to our role as thinking-feeling, world-making beings. I could imagine other teachers drawing on more recent psychological research to make similar points. As I hope is clear though, it is not sufficient (or even necessary) to discuss metaphysics in the abstract. Instead, to truly follow William James writing teachers must create occasions which make real the world's infinite richness. We must help students hear the excess, to paraphrase Diane Davis. This involves leaving the page.

There are of course myriad ways to make students aware of the ongoing, embodied process of world-making. My particular route, in the fall of 2016, started when I read an article online about Charles Foster, a research associate at the University of Oxford, who extolls the virtue of "living like a badger."<sup>13</sup> A Jamesian writing pedagogy is, above all else, responsive to its environment; my students and I will engage whatever (current events, internet memes, TV shows) interests us at the moment. Foster's article interested me, so I took it to class and we discussed. His basic claim is that humans, due to evolutionary concerns, are overly reliant on our sense of sight. We therefore miss out on much of our world. Foster suggests we try living like animals—crawling through the underbrush like a badger, for example—to engage latent sensory resources. By physically experiencing more of the world, he believes, we can come to live in it in more productive and enjoyable ways.

The connection between Foster and James should be readily apparent. James, remember, argues that industrial society has encased us in ossified abstraction, thus alienating us from our senses. To invigorate our thought and language we must find ways to break these bonds. Foster's idea of "becoming an animal" provides a model for how we might go about this. If we can assume the perspective of an otter or badger, his thinking goes, the radically limited nature of our (human) world can be made real. This sounds plausible to me. As such, after reading Foster's article and discussing the merits of his position, I asked my students to emulate his example. Before our next class, they were to choose an animal, go a private location, and "become" that animal. This entails assuming its physical posture and engaging the world through its particular sensory resources. One must make herself small like a mouse or stealthy like a cat, and sniff and scratch and skulk.

---

<sup>13</sup> "Ig Nobel prize winner: why I lived like a badger, an otter, a deer and a swift," from [theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com).

In addition to becoming an animal, my students were instructed to reflect on the experience (as a human, obviously) and write a blog post about it. *Think about what your animal would smell, taste, feel. How does the space change when understood from this new perspective? What do you notice that you missed before?* my writing prompt asked. In their reflection, I encouraged them to describe the experience in as much detail as possible—to be creative—but also to engage both the experience and Foster’s ideas critically. *Reflect on what happened. Was this a valuable activity? Did you learn anything or come to any new understandings? If not, why not?* Aware of the student tendency to say what they think their teacher wants to hear, I added a further caveat: *Don’t be afraid to say you didn’t learn anything. But, make sure you sufficiently justify your claim.*

Before discussing my students’ responses to this admittedly unusual task, I must stress that this was meant to be more than a creative writing prompt. The students were not asked to sit at their writing desk and simply *imagine* what it would be like to be a cat or bird. Instead, like Foster, they were expected to get down on the ground and *physically engage* with their environment. As James makes clear, it is sensation that disrupts form. Foster’s (very Jamesian) claim is that through conscious will and altered physical posture we can “take in” more and different sensory stimuli. We can “stretch and break our familiar habits of listening,” as Matthew Heard says. To know more, to feel more—this is the movement that lies at the heart of an ethics of attunement. And the entire process is premised on interaction between thinking-feeling body and material world. It cannot be accomplished solely in the mind.

The blog posts produced in response to this prompt fell into a number of categories. As to be expected, there were certain students who refused to play the game; instead of engaging sensation, they engaged only imagination. As one student put it, he treated the assignment as a “thought exercise.” In turn, he wrote a creative piece about what he *thought* it would be like to be a squirrel in the park near our campus. The writing this student produced is telling. In his blog post, he writes about climbing a tree and suddenly beginning to notice new things. *I could hear the individual cars driving past, the gentle rustling of the leaves overhead... I could smell the earthy scent coming up from the ground mixed with the general city smell.* In turn, his world is transformed. *The activity proved a valuable experience,* he concludes, *because it showed me the amount of information I was missing out on by allowing my sight to take over my senses.* Now, this student is a skilled writer. His post is intricately structured, engaging parallelism and other formal tricks. Note the nature of the descriptions, though: they are so vague, so expected. Note how he moves steadily towards a teacher-approved conclusion. He climbs the tree, claims to be enlightened and includes some sensory detail to support his claim. But there is nothing surprising here, or unusual or queer. Nothing disrupts his narrative. In short, I would suggest that this is a classic case of a writer *not* engaging the excess. Instead of working from the bottom up—encountering the world’s plurality and struggling to make sense of what he finds—this writer works from the top down. He has a



premade pattern and projects it on to experience, ignoring (or in this case, not even attempting to discover) what lies beyond his habitual consciousness. The result, as we can see, is technically perfect, but utterly bland writing.

Unlike the student discussed above, most students did make an attempt to mimic the embodiment of their chosen animal. Interestingly, those who seemed to get the most out of the exercise were those that never left their dorm rooms. They pretended to be housecats or birds, and used the opportunity to defamiliarize this most familiar of spaces. A non-native English writer, Huaijin, was perhaps the most successful in harnessing the excess to (re)vitalize thought and story. Unlike the writer discussed above, Huaijin is not particularly comfortable with the written word. A math major, I also don't think he would describe himself as particularly creative. This background makes his blog post all the more remarkable. Huaijin's post starts off with a rather standard introductory move. *Never once in my life have I lay on the floor of my dorm before I finally tried to do it today. Though I'm one those neat freaks, I can't complain how dirty the carpet in my room is. Because today I'm a bug....* It then quickly descends (or ascends) into what can only be described as the Kafka-esque. The second paragraph:

I tried to disconnect my mind with my body. I stopped moving my legs not my arms; I felt like I was only a size of football – that's the size of my head and it's still too big for a bug. I turned my head around. I saw the white roof; I saw my roommate's lost sock hiding behind one of his suitcases; I saw little pieces of tortilla chips which I'm not sure how long have they been there. I started imaging myself dealing with those food pieces, as a bug. I dragged one with one pair of my legs with other two pairs holding my body. It must be heavy – even a tiny piece of corn chip probably weights the same as me....

The first thing I notice about this passage is its richness, its density. To make meaning is to connect bits of experience and here is a writer weaving an intricate web. He moves from body to room to imaginings, with each step composed of myriad concrete details. And note the nature of the details: the lost sock, the little pieces of tortilla chips. Unlike "rustling leaves" or "city smells," these belong to no pre-packaged narrative. They also don't come from "inside" Huaijin. Baring a certain type of genius, I'd contend that a writer *cannot just make this stuff up*. It is original thought and story and arises, in this case, from the writer's mindful immersion in the singularity of experience. Here, I'd argue, is a writer who for a moment became attentive, attuned, both to the material world and the tools he uses to make sense of it (his body, his imagination). This focus on both self and world is, of course, a key component of an ethics of attunement. It is what allows a writer to inject new life into shared forms.

Huaijin continues:

While a bunch of boys laughing and yelling curse words getting close, I knew the dude lives next door was back along with his friends as usual. But this time, I felt it differently.

After music started and they started to hit the wall, I leaned myself on it. I could clearly feel the ‘shock waves’ from that side of the wall which were just typical ‘don don don’ noise I used to hear when I was still a human....

I heard the door lock clutching. It must be my roommate. I tried to turn my head and look at him, but I couldn’t. I had to turn myself upside down to look at him. He looked much taller than usual despite he’s only 5’9 or below. It felt kind of the same as when I stand at the bottom of the cathedral actually.

‘Step on me’, I said.... My roommate didn’t say anything but just dropped his backpack and left.

At a formal level, these lines display the sort of bottom-up movement a Jamesian writing pedagogy encourages. Rather than allowing an overarching idea to structure his narrative, Huaijin allows the larger form to emerge out of the individual events. He moves from parts to wholes, in other words. Equally important, we also see here the disruption of habitual modes of perception which lies at the heart of an ethics of attunement. Through assuming the pose of a bug, Huaijin is able to experience the noise coming from next-door, and his roommate’s physical form, in fundamentally new ways. Regarding the noise, he is able to feel what before he had only heard; through conscious attunement, in other words, new aspects of the stimulus are revealed. Then, through the act of writing, he uses this new sense data to articulate a more complex conception of said stimulus. For James, remember, the ultimate ethical impulse is to move beyond what we know, to grasp some of the excess, and thus create more generous and expansive concepts. This is exactly what Huaijin does.

Earlier I spoke of *making real* James’s ideas, rather than presenting them in the abstract. The world, for James, is infinitely rich and every perception limited. By attending to the soundwaves, and bearing witness as they change into something new, Huaijin is confronted with this reality. Creating situations which allow for this sort of confrontation, I’d argue, is how we go about making radical empiricism real.

Now, I’m not claiming Huaijin, after pretending to be a bug, will suddenly become a Jamesian pragmatist. I am also not claiming that exercises like this should form the core of a first-year writing pedagogy. What I am claiming is that through this simple exercise, early in the semester, certain habits of looking and listening were cultivated. The idea is that students like Huaijin will internalize the lessons learned and apply them as we engage in more traditional academic work. He will see, for example, that the complexity and mutability he noticed in the soundwaves also pertains to texts, people, cultures, concepts. In this regard, my course, like the type of student writing I value, works from the bottom-up.

\*\*\*

The previous two sections show what an ethics of attunement might look like in practice. In “On a Certain Blindness,” James celebrates attunement in its constructive and destructive, intellectual and affective, guises. He proposes that attention to a jonquil, or a muddy farmstead, can result in the radical reorientation of self and world. Huaijin’s blog post demonstrates the pedagogical force of these ideas. By immersing himself in experience, and allowing what he finds there to infuse his thought and story, he creates an original and provocative piece of writing. In doing so he gains practice in renaming the world in more sophisticated ways, in finding better names for the case. He thus displays what James and I believe is the highest moral calling—an ethics of attunement.

## 4. IDENTITY

### 4.1 “I DON’T GET ANY MONEY OUT OF IT”

This chapter is about identity: the meaning of the I. How do we conceive of our selves and those selves we interact with in the classroom? This question of definition is essential for composition theory, I believe, because at its core, writing instruction is about the interaction of selves. These entities come into contact, engage in certain ritualized behavior, and are changed (hopefully for the better). My claim is that we need a more complete understanding of what is acted upon, what is changed. As in previous chapters, I’ll turn to William James for guidance. James’s deep phenomenological analysis of selfhood provides a provocative lens through which to view social interaction. The self for James is many; it’s more than language, more than flesh, and more than can be known. But it’s also most definitely a “self”—embodied and individuated, capable of autonomy and self-direction. As we’ll see, this insistence on the importance of the individual puts James at odd with much recent composition theory. This is not to say, though, that James views the self as monadic or atomistic. Instead, he presents the thinking-feeling human being as an assemblage of disparate elements, a “bundle of relations,” to quote John McDermott. This assemblage is an open system, constantly reconstituting itself through interplay with others and environment. Such a conception, when applied to teacher and student, reader and writer, opens up new relational possibilities. It allows for growth. It is therefore “good theory” in the most basic sense.

Underpinning this chapter is the idea that current conceptualizations of identity in composition studies fall short. From a Jamesian perspective, we can say that talk of identity too often promotes *foreignness* rather than *intimacy*. As religion scholar David Lamberth explains, this distinction is key to

James's thought. Intimacy, Lamberth writes, "is James's most general criterion for distinguishing a good philosophy" (156). James links intimacy with sociality. Intimate relations are those which are reciprocal, *inter-active* rather than *mono-active*. A world of intimacy, in turn, is ecological in nature; our selves, and the real, the good and the true, are seen as evolving together within a "common socius" (156). A world of foreignness, on the other hand, is defined by distance and disconnection; the real, the good and the true are external to selves and their desires.

Like all of James's claims, his promotion of intimacy is based on the consequences of such thought. "From a pragmatic point of view," James writes, "the difference between living against a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust" (qtd. Lamberth 157). An assumption of foreignness, this thinking goes, makes us conceive of the object and other as hostile to our interests. This leads to caution, suspicion and eventually, stagnation (as interaction is needed for growth). An assumption of intimacy, on the other hand, allows us to see ourselves in the world around us (and vice versa). This makes for an atmosphere of trust, in which individuals can work together under the belief that they have a stake in the common whole. As a result, shared social goals can be articulated and realized.

I think most writing teachers recognize the importance of promoting trust in the classroom. If we follow James, we see that trust starts with the recognition of our co-affectability. It starts when we conceive our selves as porous entities, shaped by the object and the other, and open to growth and change. James, in turn, presents a theory of identity which allows for this sort of conception. Grounded in the natural sciences, his ideas about who and what we are, arise out of and rigorously respect the reality of lived experience. This is key. Too often in rhetoric and composition our theory seems alien to life as it is actually lived. The result: barriers to interaction.

Now, I'm no starry-eyed romantic; I recognize that the modern university is defined by barriers and boundaries: between art and science, teacher and student, text and world. William James teaches us to push against these obstacles. But what might such resistance look like? To find out, James would suggest that we descend from the abstract to the concrete. We must practice a way of thinking (and writing) which lies "flat on its belly in the middle of experience, in the very thick of its sand and gravel" (RE 112). Per this imperative, in the following pages I'd like to engage in a particularly *intimate* mode of scholarship. Alongside theoretical discussions, I will trace—to the best of my ability—my own experience wrestling with notions of identity in the classroom. In doing so, I hope to show both the inadequacy of current theory and the possibility inherent in a Jamesian point of view.

\*\*\*

It's midway through the semester, a first-year composition course at a large public university. I enter the room at exactly three o'clock. Who am I? Tall, white, stooped, bespectacled, balding. Old for a

grad student. Before entering academia I worked three years as an attorney—the only white employee of a minority-owned firm in Kansas City. After that I lived in China and Saudi Arabia. Now, in middle-age, I am once again a creature of the American college classroom. Here, as on the street in Urumqi or Riyadh I present as droll, slightly arrogant, utterly harmless. I recognize that I seem much at home in school, books, theory. Leaning on the podium, I ask my students to do me a favor. Someday I may want to use their writing in a published work; would anyone be up for this? If so, can you sign a waiver?

Brianna.<sup>1</sup> Brianna is (how should I put this?) very different than me. A black female, twenty years my junior. She dresses like Madonna in *Desperately Seeking Susan*: crop-tops, extravagant necklaces, gloves without fingers. She's an army brat, from South Carolina (pronounced Care-lina). My waiver form has a "yes" box and a "no" box, and under the latter, a line that allows the student to provide an explanation. Brianna checks "no," and on the line, writes "I don't get any money out of it." Over the course of the year, I distributed forty waivers. Thirty were returned. Only one was checked "no." So, to put it blandly, Brianna is unique. And oddly brave. But who is she? How should I understand the various encounters—the connections and disconnections—we experienced throughout the course of the semester? On the day in question there was a clash of selves, obviously. What was interacting with what though, when, looking me in the eye, Brianna handed me that document?

Some would argue that for a writing teacher, there's no legitimate object of inquiry here. They recommend we stay within the margins. William Coles, Jr., for example, claims that his sole object of interest is a student's "literary self, a self construable from the way words fall on the page. The other self, the identity of the student, is something with which [he] as a teacher can have nothing to do" (12). Under this view, Brianna's accent, fashion sense and body language don't matter. Or they only matter when they emerge in discourse, when she writes about current fashion trends, for example. Now, I am somewhat sympathetic with Coles's position. I agree (of course) that one goal of writing instruction should be to help students take on new textual identities. And I see the practical (political) benefits of maintaining a barrier between text and world. We must admit though, that writing instruction is not purely a textual process. Brianna will become a better writer not solely through writing essays and receiving written comments, but through *embodied interaction with other selves*. These interactions, which occur every day in the writing classroom, implicate how we look and talk and move. They are also powerful, capable of disrupting and thereby (re)vitalizing the forms by which we make sense of the world. They thus directly impact who we are and who we can become.

---

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym, per convention.

Writing instruction, in short, exceeds the discursive. Composition theory, in turn, must think beyond the page. With this in mind, I ask again: who is Brianna? I know we are teacher and student, man and woman, reader and writer, and also more than any of these designations. I know what I felt the moment I read her waiver form (annoyance, tinged with respect). I know the appropriate “teacherly” reaction (let it pass). I know of our relative positions within intersecting hierarchies of culture, institution, race and sex. I know of clashing discourses, and of a long history of white appropriation of black labor and artistic creation. The question remains though: how should I understand our relationship? What is interacting with what? And how can I make this interaction as productive as possible, for both teacher and student?

#### 4.2 WILLIAM JAMES AND THE ART OF SELF-CREATION

Composition theory presents a myriad of lenses through which to view my encounter with Brianna. In the following pages, I’ll peer through some of these. First, though, it’s useful to think about the impulses which animate James’s understanding of identity. How might the lens that he provides differ from those we typically use? To answer this question requires that we contextualize James, both in terms of history, and in terms of our discipline.

Now, William James has a large and unusually varied catalog of published work. He was also not afraid to embrace contradiction: a noted natural scientist, for example, he was well known for his defense of religion. Given the complex nature of James’s oeuvre, it’s possible to read him in myriad ways. As we’ve seen, in this project, I foreground the *material* aspect of James’s thought.<sup>2</sup> Materialism, as I understand it, is simply the idea that all aspects of thought and being are intimately connected to the physical world. Language, consciousness, ideology, desire—none of these can be theorized without taking into account bodies and things. As we’ve seen, such a reading connects James to the recent material turn in rhetoric and composition. Indeed, throughout this project I have tried to put James in conversation with this important strain of scholarship. There are key differences, though, between the

---

<sup>2</sup> Materialist readings of James are not unheard of. In the past decade, Alexander Livingston, Kennan Ferguson and Bruce Wilshire have taken similar approaches.

materialism of William James and that of composition's "new materialists." These differences are particularly manifest in conceptions of identity.

The fundamental new materialist move, we can say, is that of decentering. Whether practiced in the ecological (Cooper, Syverson), actor-network (Rivers, Lynch) or posthuman (Dobrin, Boyle) mode, new materialist thought seeks to distribute agency, desire and cognition across ecologies, networks and webs. To an extent, William James lobbies against this tendency. But only to an extent. As we'll see, like new materialists, James complicates the individual/society binary: the Jamesian self is an open system, remember. Integrally, though, James also insists on the constructive power of human thought. This is a key point and one which puts him at odds with new materialist tendencies. New materialism, taken as a whole, wishes to foreground the power of things. James wishes to foreground the power of people: to show how individual, self-directed, thinking-feeling beings are capable of world-making. Later in this chapter I'll put James in direct conversation with some new materialist thinkers. First, though, I'd like to further explore James's seemingly paradoxical belief that the individual is both porous and powerful. This requires a discussion of William James the man and the time in which he lived.

As noted in chapter one, the half-century after the American Civil War was an age of great uncertainty. Darwin and modern science had upended the long-standing balance between humans and nature. At the same time, industrial capitalism was having a similar effect on relations among humans. Historian Francesca Bordogna charts this upheaval. Bordogna argues that in this age of "robber barons," artisans, farmers, and workers of all stripes were losing control of their labor, the traditional source of personal identity. The result was widespread anxiety "concerning the erosion of the unitary and masterful self" (506). Some feared this change, while some welcomed it, believing that the decline of isolated individuality—and the revelation of our inherent connectedness—would open up new political possibilities. James, as always, was of two minds. He saw the self as a social entity, but at the same time, wished to retain a conception of the individual as potent moral agent.

James's need for moral agency, along with his privileging of the constructive power of human thought, must be read in light of his personal experience. His father, Henry James Sr., aptly described by Bordogna as an "unorthodox follower of Swedenborg and of Fourier's utopian socialism," was a loving, but somewhat suffocating presence for young William (528). Henry Sr. promoted a vision of peace through utter submission to God. For him, "the pursuit of selfhood was the 'source of all evils' and to relinquish the illusions of selfhood and substantiality was... the path to individual and social salvation" (528). From a young age, William rebelled against such self-effacement.

James's belief in the power of the individual took definite form in April 1870. Long plagued by bouts of depression and psychosomatic illness, that spring he was on the brink of suicide. Twenty-eight years old, unemployed and unmarried, he was paralyzed by his own insignificance. It was then that he



experienced what he would later refer to as his “death and rebirth.” The experience is recorded in his journal from April 30, 1870:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second ‘Essais’ and see no reason why his definition of free will — ‘the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts’ — need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present — until next year — that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will... I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating (Rowe).

In these striking lines, which Stephen Rowe calls “one of the very central expressions of culture and the humanities in the twentieth century,” we see the seed of James’s lifelong project (6). In short, he seeks to subordinate ontology to human will, to establish truth as what works in the way of belief. In chapter three, we saw that for James, morality entails holding fast to an idea that would otherwise be driven from the mind. Here we see the event which lead him to this conclusion. In a pluralistic universe, both “free” and “not free” are possible. Young James wishes to choose the former because of its positive consequences. But holding fast to this idea is difficult. His revelation comes when he realizes it is the struggle itself which gives his act moral worth. Because of the difficulty of asserting his freedom, the very act of assertion allows him to *prove* that he is an active force. For James, this realization reshapes his life. He is able to marry, find work. In resisting those forces which sought to deny him selfhood, in other words, he finds a way to escape the meaninglessness and aporia which had previously haunted him. The result was a lifelong belief in the constructive power of the will, of “the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world.”

So the Jamesian self is capable of free will, of agency, of action. It is capable of reshaping the conditions of its existence. But this is not to say that the self is in anyway monadic or self-contained. Quite the opposite. As will be discussed in detail below, the Jamesian self is “metaphysically weak... menaced by inner division, surrounded by porous boundaries and only precariously whole” (Bordogna 519). In the above lines we see an example of these “porous boundaries”: young James comes to his revelation, after all, not in solitary contemplation, but in engagement with Renouvier.<sup>3</sup> Integrally, James turns the self’s riven nature—a seeming weakness—into a strength. The fragmented self, he believes, calls forth an act of construction. It is through this act, through whole-hearted engagement in the process

---

<sup>3</sup> As discussed in chapter two, James’s mature metaphysics holds that language and lived experience are always intertwined. Here we see the sort of life events that might have lead him to this conclusion.

of self-creation, that one gains strength and agency. Just like he willed himself to believe, one must will themselves into being. Nothing is guaranteed though (for if it were, it wouldn't be worth pursuing).

Overall, we can say that the self, for James, is socially defined, and because of that fact, becomes open to self-definition. This seeming paradox is how he resolves the tension between the socialization of life inherent in the industrial age and his profound respect for the individual. It also hints at the complexity of his vision. James's presents a world that contains both structures and selves, with each exceeding the other. The self implicates others and objects, most certainly, but that self's potentiality is never determined from without: there's always an excess, something that escapes determination. This excess is revealed in acts of human thought, in acts of human will.

\*\*\*

Brianna. She is not necessarily a poor student: she comes to every class, hands work in on time. But her essays are clunky, formulaic. She also sends text messages in class and often seems bored. During mid-term conferences, I ask her if something is wrong. "It doesn't seem like you like this class very much," I say. My dissertation advisor is away and I'm using his office. I slouch low behind the big desk. On all sides are walls of books, nick-knacks, pictures of people I don't know. "It's boring," she says. "Why do you think that? You like philosophy, yeah?" I recognize the gentle, rather sing-song tone of my voice. I'm speaking to her like I would my younger sister. "I don't know.... I have my habits, OK? I like to write in a certain way." This statement fascinates me. She's hit upon the key element of my (Jamesian) pedagogy: my desire to break students out of preset forms, to make them write and think in new ways. I didn't tell them my goal directly, but Brianna picked it up. And doesn't like it.

I should also mention that the week before I had my students bring in a piece of "good" writing and explain why it was good. Some brought copies of *Harry Potter*. One guy brought a tweet from Kanye West. Brianna brought an excerpt from Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty." Her voice quivered as she read it to the class.

### 4.3 POSTCOLONIAL BLUES

So William James lived in a fragmented world. The same can be said of our world. Since Mina Shaughnessy in the 1970s (at least), compositionists have been grappling with heterogeneity in the writing classroom. Postcolonial theory has been key to this negotiation. Though not many

compositionists quote Homi Bhabha or Edward Said anymore, the legacy of postcolonial comp scholarship remains. Therefore, to understand how identity, and the interaction between identities, has been conceived in our field, it's necessary to examine this work. If anything, it illustrates some pitfalls to avoid when theorizing "the other."

Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone" provides an apt entry point into both postcolonial theory, and discussions of identity in general. First presented as the keynote address at a literacy conference in Pittsburgh in September 1990, this piece has been widely influential, with Joseph Harris referring to Pratt as the "patron theorist" of composition in the 1990s (2012, 161). A professor of comparative literature, in "Contact Zones" Pratt contends that the classroom, like the speech community writ large, has too often been conceived as a "unified and homogenous social world" in which all the participants are playing by the same rules, respectful of the same norms (38). As a result, important acts of student resistance often go unnoticed. To counter this tendency, Pratt presents a model of the classroom as "contact zone," in which the "specific historical relationships" in which students stand to texts (and each other) are examined (38). In such a space, meanings are allowed to proliferate; students confront the fact that anything they say will inevitably be received "in radically heterogeneous ways that we are neither able nor entitled to prescribe" (38). This encounter with interpretive difference, Pratt argues, works to "put identities and ideas on the line" (38).

It is easy to see why Pratt's notion of contact zones was so well received. There's an innate pluralism in her pedagogy which must be celebrated. As I've tried to make clear, the sort of growth that I value (and that I want you to value) is best achieved in a pluralistic environment in which various interpretive schemes are enacted and evaluated. Pratt's classroom allows for this critical analysis of how we think and why. So the contact zone model is valuable. I want to suggest, though, that Pratt's conception of identity—that structure of thought and feeling that each body brings into the classroom—is flawed. This puts an artificial limit on what ideas and individuals can become.

Harris hints at the flaws in Pratt's scheme when he notes that though respectful of difference, she fails to explain how differences can be negotiated, how change actually occurs. "The very metaphor of *contact*," Harris writes, "suggests a kind of superficiality... of cultures banging or sliding or bouncing off each other" (2012, 163). I agree. There's a sense, present throughout "Contact Zones," that Pratt is thinking of "culture" and "identity" as solid entities, as something other than linguistic markers of felt different/same. Pratt's desire for solidity (and solidarity) is made explicit in her discussion of "safe houses." These are "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as... homogeneous, sovereign communities" (40). Within these zones of agreement, groups formulate "claims on the world" which they then "bring into the contact zones" (40). As I see it, here Pratt conceptualizes the classroom as something like a parliamentary debating chamber: groups with similar interests caucus,

develop shared goals and strategies, then, on the debating floor, put these strategies into action. It's voting bloc versus voting bloc, a zero sum game played among fixed entities, with the goal being to carve up a fixed set of discursive resources.

Harris argues that Pratt, despite her best efforts, fails to do away with unified, utopian communities: she just makes them smaller. Again, I think this is correct. While Pratt aptly theorizes the differences that pertain between teacher and student, or majority and minority, she papers over the differences that exist between individuals. Her conception of identity, in Jamesian terms, fails to capture the utter singularity of lived experience. This causes a variety of problems. First, as recent intersectional work reveals, engaging the world through fixed categories often obscures certain bodies and desires (those that don't present as the right kind of other, for example). It also works to limit growth. When we think in terms of groups, rather than singular individuals, we restrict the range of possibility open to individuals. We allow certain forms of resistance (against standard academic discourse, for example) while foreclosing others (against "home" discourses). From a Jamesian perspective, composition should oppose this sort of a priori restriction on thought and story. Our goal, remember, should be to promote more expansive acts of meaning-making. This often involves tracing lines of connection which disrupt current groupings in the service of more inclusive ones. My concern is that we can't do this when we conceptualize identities as voting blocs.

\*\*\*

Another discussion of identity in the writing classroom can be found in Bronwyn Williams's, "Speak for Yourself? Power and Hybridity in the Cross-Cultural Classroom." In this essay, Williams, drawing on the work of Homi Bhabha and others, compares his role teaching academic English to international students to that of a colonial administrator. Though not a particularly influential work, this essay is notable, I believe, because it provides a good example of how a theory of identity can distance us from one another.

Williams views writing instruction as a form of enculturation. For him, taking on a new language, and the associated genres, necessarily entails indoctrination in "the values privileged by the institution," and thus "the dominant culture" (590). Notably, Williams presents these values as coherent, and inherently opposed to the equally coherent values of his students' home cultures. This view of our enterprise paints the socially conscious writing teacher into a corner. No matter what the teacher does, "epistemic violence" is perpetrated as the student is forced to conform to Western ways of thinking (595). The student's options are also limited. Because the culture she seeks to enter will inevitably position her as other, she is faced with a stark choice: "mimicry or resistance" (600). The main thrust of Williams's essay details how these options might reveal themselves on the page.

My response to this piece is aptly summed up by a single notation: “man, this is depressing.” Good theory, as I’ve argued throughout this project, is thought and story which opens up new, more expansive possibilities for ourselves and students. It allows for more intense interaction and thus personal growth. In that regard, this essay is not good theory. So where does it go wrong? The primary problem, as I see it, is that Williams deploys culture as a sort of God-term. Cultures, in this essay, are monoliths. And identities are innately tied to cultures. There is very little play, very little fluidity. This in turn, limits the thoughts one can think and the positions one can assume.

To illustrate my point I’d like to examine a piece of student writing. It’s an excerpt from an essay by Masud, an Egyptian student in Williams’s class. Regarding Ottoman rule in Egypt, Masud writes:

In my opinion this dark period of long Turkish rule was a sad and awful time in the history of the Arab world. There can be no argument made to say there was a single political or economic achievement gained. The decline of Muslim power was dominant from beginning to end and has, because of the harsh and unforgivable ways of the Ottomans, has led to a feeling of apathy which made the Arab character reach a point of standstill from which came their decline.

Williams presents this piece as an example of resistance through mimicry. “The response of the colonial subject,” he writes, is always incomplete, and as such “contains within it mockery of the colonizer’s authority” (591). This essay, Williams argues, makes such a move. In particular, he sees Masud’s “emotional, almost vitriolic” tone and refusal to complicate his opinion in proper academic fashion as a way to elide the position that the colonizing authority (his teacher) has constructed for him (591).

Now, I’m not going to quibble with Williams’s application of postcolonial theory; I will allow that his is a correct reading per those terms. What does this reading do for us, though? Perhaps it allows Williams to read Masud’s paper more generously: Masud is “resisting colonial authority,” rather than just “being lazy.” That’s worth something. I think we can do better though. As such, I’d like to propose an alternative reading, one which I believe allows for more intense engagement between teacher and student (a more intimate relation, William James would say). I’m well positioned to comment, I think, because, as an English teacher in the Middle East, I’ve received this *exact same essay*.<sup>4</sup>

So how do I understand what’s happening here? Simply put, I see a young man repeating a discourse he was taught in high school. Nothing more, nothing less. As such, I’d respond the way I’d respond to an American student who told me that he “respects the flag, and all it stands for.” I’d draw

---

<sup>4</sup> One is also likely to receive a similar essay in Korea or Zimbabwe, or any nation that was once under colonial rule. Postcolonial governments are often highly nationalistic: they gain authority by presenting themselves as protecting the nation from foreign influence. Hence, students must be taught about the “bad old days.” This approved discourse thus becomes an easy one on which to rely.

Masud's attention to some facts which complicate his case. What about Egypt's cotton industry I'd ask, didn't that prosper under Ottoman rule? Perhaps I'd send him a link to the Wikipedia page for Qassem Amin or Tewfik Al-Hakim—both Egyptians writers of Turkish descent. Certainly I'd ask him to consider how he came to hold his view and what the consequences of it might be. In short, I'd try to help him achieve a more nuanced view of his topic and his thinking about that topic. I'd try to help him see the complex, inscrutable, often contradictory nature of both. Whether or not he's engaged in an act of postcolonial mockery, simply does not matter.

My response to Masud's essay is obviously different than that of Professor Williams. I also think it's more productive in that it refuses to construct (or allow) conceptual barriers to interaction. Williams's reading, because of the ideas about identity on which it is based, throws up just such barriers. In short, rather than seeing Masud as an singular being, capable of self-directed change, Williams views him as an emissary of a grave and mysterious god called "Egyptian Culture." His teacher, likewise, is an agent of "Western Culture." Right away, this conceptualization establishes a distance between these two figures. In the service of good politics, it robs the encounter of its intimacy. It thus limits its impact.

\*\*\*

Returning to Matt and Brianna. We now have a new lens through which to view our encounter. My classroom is a "contact zone," it seems, in which differing interpretive schemes clash. In regard to Brianna's written work, I think this is accurate. She seems to believe that essays should follow a certain tightly structured pattern; I believe that rhetorical flexibility—the ability to adjust form to situation—is paramount. But are Brianna's commitment to habit and her disruptive classroom behavior properly classified as resistance? Is she engaged in mockery of my colonial authority? Do we have a clash of cultures: the dominant vs. the subaltern? Viewing the situation in this way does reveal new intricacies, I admit. I see why Brianna might have difficulty adapting to the norms of my classroom and why she might not want to adapt. But does this mean I should let Brianna use her phone in class? And how does it account for her seemingly genuine love of Berlin's analytical philosophy (and her tendency to write essays in a similar mode)? In short, how does it account for the details?

#### 4.4 THE INTERSECTIONAL IMPULSE

A common thread in my discussion so far has been a dissatisfaction with conceptions of identity that don't respect the utter singularity of lived experience. When we think in terms of big rather than small, abstract rather than concrete, we distance ourselves from the site at which change—in thoughts, in people—is actually made. Through rationalization or explanation, we shield ourselves from the encounter with difference. We therefore deprive ourselves of its fruits.

Interestingly, across the humanities, recent discussions of identity have expressed a similar dissatisfaction with categories and classifications. This discussion is most often framed in terms of intersectionality. In a useful introduction to the topic, Leslie McCall identifies three general strains of intersectional methodology. For our purposes, I'd like to zero in on two of these. First, there is what McCall terms the "intracategorical approach." This methodology, often practiced by feminists of color, doesn't completely reject identity labels ("black" or "woman," for example). Instead, it seeks to draw finer categorical distinctions, thereby paying heed to the experiences of groups at neglected points of intersection. Practitioners of this method, McCall writes, "avoid the fully deconstructive rejection of all categorization, yet they remain deeply skeptical of... homogenizing generalizations" (1781). They seek to reveal the difference within difference, in other words. Angela Davis or Gloria Anzaldúa might be seen as working in this vein.<sup>5</sup>

McCall also identifies what she terms an "anticategorical" strain of intersectional thought. This methodology, promoted by poststructuralist thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, holds that social life is by definition fluid and heterogeneous: fixed identity categories—man/woman, gay/straight—are social impositions, fictions which work to maintain the status quo. The premise of the anticategorical approach, McCall writes, is that "nothing fits neatly except as a result of imposing a stable and homogenizing order on a more unstable and heterogeneous social reality" (1777). To deconstruct this order, and the binary categories which sustain it, is to deconstruct hegemony.

Within rhetoric and composition, some of the most important work to display the intersectional impulse has occurred under the auspices of queer theory. Generally falling under McCall's "anticategorical" heading, queer theorists stress the fluidity of identity, and the inherent excess and unknowability of both self and other. In this regard, queer approaches, like intersectional methodologies

---

<sup>5</sup> Within composition proper it is surprisingly difficult to find work that expressly identifies as intersectional in the intracategorical mode. Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own," would be an example. Barbara Tomlinson's "Colonizing Intersectionality: Replicating Racial Hierarchy in Feminist Academic Arguments," would be another.

in general, correspond well with both the thought of William James, and the mission of composition as I understand it. Queer theory, in its relentless “queering” of concepts and selves, demands new ways of thinking, new lines of connection. It can therefore help disrupt hegemonic thought and story.

An early application of queer theory to the writing classroom can be found in Karen Kopelson’s “Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary,” from 2002. Like much queer theory, Kopelson takes as her point of departure the idea, from Judith Butler, that identity is fundamentally performative: repeated over time, *acts* of gender (or any other identity category) become *facts* of gender. She views this position as a direct challenge to much composition scholarship, which she criticizes for positing identity as “singular, unified and static” (24). In short, Kopelson wants to present identity as a moving target. She wants to draw attention to the processes by which identities are made and remade. This approach, like Butler’s work in general, is deeply material, in that it presents belief as arising from practice. Identities, rather than floating about free from actual human bodies (to be bestowed by the god of Culture), are made in specific, delimited interactions. Consider Williams’ Egyptian student, Masud. His identity as a “postcolonial subject,” Butler would say, arises not from his place of birth, or the discourses he was taught in high school. Instead, it arises from his actions, and interactions, in concrete spaces, how he “presents” and how he is “taken.” Integrally, under this view, Masud’s identity is never final; it is constantly being (re)negotiated. (Re)invention is thus possible.<sup>6</sup>

A similar queering can be found in Johnathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes’s essay “Flattening Effects: Composition’s Multicultural Imperative and the Problem of Narrative Coherence.” Here the authors take aim at a familiar target: multicultural pedagogies which, in the name of “shared humanity,” erase or “flatten” difference (see Olson, Grobman, Wallace). The problem with such pedagogies—and the bland narratives of tolerance they encourage—is that they promote a false sense of mastery. The student writer is moved to squeeze the other into preexisting conceptual categories, thereby reducing her singularity into an “easy, normative legibility” (428). For Alexander and Rhodes, this is problematic because it works to render invisible systems of oppression, and the unique challenges such systems pose to the queer subject. From a Jamesian perspective, I would lodge a related complaint: simply put, if categories are not being redrawn, growth is not occurring. To know more and be more, remember, we must disrupt ossified systems of meaning. This occurs when the same old thoughts and stories are shown to be inadequate. If the student writer is working only within preexisting conceptual

---

<sup>6</sup> Of course, our material circumstances are often beyond the limits of our control. Hence a performative understanding of identity doesn’t claim to offer absolute freedom of self. I do think, though, that with its emphasis on real bodies in real spaces—on the “sand and gravel” of experience, as William James would say—it opens up, rather than closes down, possibility.



categories—which is what Alexander and Rhodes persuasively argue often occurs in the multicultural classroom—then disruption, adjustment, and hence intellectual and ethical growth, are not being realized.

Alexander and Rhodes provide an interesting example of how what we know can impede understanding. They note that Alexander is gay and married, hence a “married gay man.” In trying to imagine his lifeworld, one might deploy the concept of “married man” as it is understood in a heterosexual context. This will lead her to believe she “knows” Alexander. The authors argue, though, that this understanding is by definition facile. In line with what I have identified as the intersectional impulse, they hold that Alexander, in his queerness, exceeds all attempts at categorization. The revelation of additional details—the “open” nature of his marriage, for example—can make this excess apparent. A more intimate encounter, in other words, can force categories to collapse, revealing an otherness whose “difference cannot be accounted for” (440).<sup>7</sup> This collapse can be traumatic, yes. But rather than being a barrier to social justice, Alexander and Rhodes view it as a precondition. Following Butler and Emmanuel Levinas, they argue that respect for the other must proceed from an “acknowledged not-knowing” (449). A glimpse of the other’s unfathomable queerness makes this not-knowing real.

So Alexander and Rhodes present the self as always in excess of any attempt to define it. The recognition of this fact, they believe, is an important ethical resource. I agree. The acknowledgement of the other’s innate difference, I’d suggest, demands ever increasing levels of intimacy. We can never “grasp” or “master” the other: this forces us to keep trying, to keep tracing new lines of connection. Inscrutability, we can say, provides the impetuous for learning and growth.

\*\*\*

Moving away from queer theory, we find another example of the intersectional impulse in Stephanie Kerschbaum’s “Avoiding the Difference Fixation: Identity Categories, Markers of Differences, and the Teaching of Writing.” Like the above scholars, Kerschbaum notes a tendency within composition studies to fix difference. Too often, she writes, quoting Helen Fox, cultural groups are seen as unchanging wholes “rather than as systems that blend and shift in response to pressures from the environment and their own members’ ingenuity” (259). As a result, teachers and theorists can overlook important, but uncategorized identity factors. Echoing notions of performativity, Kerschbaum argues that to overcome this blindness we must understand identity not as a thing, but as a *situated practice*. Using her own experience as a deaf person as an example, she argues that any particular identity category can only be properly understood within a particular context. Deafness, she writes, is not a stable entity “whose meaning transcends... particular interactional contexts” (617). Instead, deafness takes on new forms, has different impacts, depending on when and where it is enacted and understood.

---

<sup>7</sup> The process of making a subject aware of such details is what I have termed *attunement*.

In light of the above theoretical grounding, Kerschbaum suggests that to better understand identity we should “orient to difference as rhetorical negotiated” (619). This entails attention to what she terms “difference markers”—cues by which subjects signal the presence of difference. Such cues could include statements of disagreement, as well as more subtle signals: differences in practice or interpretation, for example.

Kerschbaum’s intervention is rather simple. It is also profound. From a Jamesian perspective, difference markers mark the fact that the world may not be as it seems. They suggest the myriad of ways that the “postcolonial subject” or the “gay married man” can see and be seen. They hint at the world’s inherent pluralism, in other words. Attending to them, therefore, can work to challenge, and hence grow, our interpretative systems.<sup>8</sup> Kerschbaum makes a similar point when she argues that attention to difference markers can help formulate habits of mind such as openness, metacognition and mental flexibility. I agree. I also see a deep ethical imperative at play. Levinas, remember, holds that we must always approach the other in a spirit of “acknowledged not-knowing.” Conversely, to “consume” the other—to reduce her to a preexisting story or pattern—is an act of violence. Kerschbaum’s approach provides a hedge against this sort of violence. It encourages us to look for details which don’t fit neatly in our narrative. As such, it allows the other to remain other.

\*\*\*

Brianna. What identity does she perform in my classroom? To what difference markers should I attend? With her crop tops and high heels she is not queer, as the term is popularly used. Quite the opposite: she engages in a very legible performance of femininity. The love of Isaiah Berlin is harder to square. Is this too a performance, of the scholar, or the thinker? Or of the socially engaged, political active, young black woman? We have intersecting identities, intersecting performances here, no doubt. And it’s not hard to imagine, as Levinas would have us believe, that they intersect within (or emerge from) a space of excess. Indeed, however I try to “think” Brianna, she eludes my grasp. If I look for difference markers—her interpretation of my class as “boring,” for example—the gap between us takes concrete shape. “I made you become an animal (a rabbit, if I recall correctly) and write about it,” I want to tell her, “how could that possibly be boring?” But apparently it was boring. Laying in the grass, “marinating in sensation” can be boring. This simple recognition hints at the distance between me and my student, the myriad of ways that the world can be.

---

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that this sort of expansion is what Pratt sought to accomplish with her notion of contact zones. The contact zone is a pluralistic space; attention to markers of difference within that space reveal it as such.

#### 4.5 THE EXCESSIVE SELF V. THE GENERIC SELF

The previous section unites a somewhat disparate array of composition scholarship. I argued that this scholarship is connected, and connects with William James, in that it foregrounds the utter singularity of lived experience. As a whole, it presents identity as flexible, shifting, and as something that emerges through situated, embodied practice. I am never myself, in a sense. Instead, “I” names a series of events, of affects, of relations, and, of course, something more than any of these things.

Overall, I think the above vision of identity provides a productive way to understand the entities that collide in the classroom. But how does it change how we understand writing? Certainly, from the above we can get some sense. If the self is inherently excessive, narratives that erase difference, and thus promote an easy tolerance, are to be avoided. Instead, we should encourage writers to scramble forms and categories, incorporate details that skew the story they are supposed to be telling. The result, it seems to me, may be something like writing-as-collage: the text as a collection of sensory details, with the whole emerging organically from the parts. Instead of claiming that the “married gay man is xyz,” for example, a writer, recognizing that the married gay man exceeds her grasp, may write simply “x + y + z.” Whatever the married gay man “is” emerges out of these details.<sup>9</sup> Such an approach is of value, I’d argue, because it moves the writer to reject the top-down imposition of form. It demands that she allow her object of inquiry “to speak,” thereby potentially disrupting her existing thought and story. With this in mind, we see how the vision of the self sketched in the preceding section can be of great value. By demanding respect for the excessive, it grants writing disruptive, and hence (re)constructive powers.

Of course, the excessive, singular self is not the only game in town. In fact, since at least the 1980s, composition has shown a marked tendency to devalue the individuated self. “The individual qua individual is a fiction,” Terry Santos writes, paraphrasing Kenneth Bruffee and John Trimbur (4). All language is social, shared, this thinking goes. The self is a product of language. Hence, self and other are social constructions. We are defined from without, naked and rather impotent, our powers of creation taken second-hand from larger forces (discourse, ideology, etc.). In short, the thinking-feeling body—which to each of us is the very center of the universe—is presented as less than some big, nebulous other.

Now, let’s be clear: language is obviously a shared, social artifact. When we use language we are in essence borrowing cultural forms. Equally clear though is that there is a very important part of every thinker, every writer that exists beyond the social. The interface between these two spheres, I’d argue, is where we must direct our attention. How can we leverage the excessive nature of lived experience to

---

<sup>9</sup> For an extended example of this approach, see my discussion of Brianna in the final section of this chapter.

(re)vitalize cultural forms? The theory of identity discussed above starts to provide something like an answer. If the self is an abyss of otherness, constantly reconstructing itself through interactions with others and environment, a degree of unpredictability is always present in human affairs. A self can be more than its inputs. Hence, an act of writing can be more than a web of citation. In other words, the individuated, embodied writer emerges as an *independently generative force*. Conceiving the writer in this way, I believe, is essential to spurring intellectual and ethical growth, and per the larger mission of this project, combating the hegemony of the fragments. It injects a degree of instability into “filter bubbles” and “you loops,” allowing writing instruction to break them apart.

In short, my claim in the following sections is that in devaluing the individuated, embodied self, certain popular strains of composition theory are robbing writing instruction of its potency. Interestingly, this same tendency to devalue the self appears in two seemingly opposing theoretical strains: genre theory and new materialism. This section will discuss the former; the next section will turn to the latter, then to a challenge from William James.

\*\*\*

Genre theory, in short, is the study of social forces through the analysis of standardized written forms. Some might think of genres as stable and rule-bound. Genre theorists take a different view. For them, genres are complex, dynamic “stabilized-for-now” sites of “social and ideological action” (Kill 216). Genres are also essential for thinking about identity. This is because, from a genre perspective, identity is relational and relations are always mediated by genre. To be visible in a social space, subjects must engage in certain standardized forms of behavior. It is through these specific forms, Charles Bazerman argues, that we “take on the mood, attitude, and actional possibilities of that place,” and thus become “the kind of person you can become there” (qtd. in Kill 217).

It should be noted that genre theory does allow for a certain degree of flexibility in regard to an individual’s relationship to a set of genres. As Elizabeth Wardle writes, identity formation in a community is a “negotiation” in which the individual has some degree of control (4). It’s always possible to add personal touches to genres and thus resist some of a community’s demands. The nature and source of this resistance are notable, though. In regard to the nature of resistance, we can say that identity, as understood by genre theorists, is something of a zero-sum game. To take on a new identity via a new set of genres means to give up a previous one. “Legitimate participation [in a community] entails the loss of certain identities even as it enables the construction of others,” Wardle writes, quoting Diane Hodges (9).

The source of resistance within genre theory is also notable. Whenever we encounter a new set of genres we must decide whether and to what extent to appropriate it. As noted, because of the zero-sum nature of genres, there will always be some drawback to appropriation: “taking on” new genres will alienate us from other identities we value. This can lead to resistance. Integrally, though, genre theorists

reject any non-discursive spring of resistance. Wardle is clear on this point. She writes that rejection or alteration of genres doesn't result from "inherent forces within each human being" (3). Instead, resistance arises from "contradiction individuals experience in their multiple subject positions" (Bawarshi, qtd in Wardle 3). In other words, for genre theorists, desire is totally determined by the discursive fields in which one moves. The individual lacks any independent generative power.

After our discussion of the rich, singular intersectional self, the reader can perhaps see the pallid nature of the world as described by genre theory. It presents life and language as a set of blocky, interlocking forms. We can only come into being or affect others through these forms. A student, for example, takes on the genres of the academy, surrenders the genres of West Virginia hillbilly life. She becomes a scholar rather than a mountaineer. Her language, thought and action are now defined by the (predetermined) affordances of the academic genre. Her previous way of being matters little, if at all. It is gone. She has surrendered those genres and that identity.

Now, such a view might provide insight into the nature of texts, but it fails to capture how we actually live, learn or write. By discounting the self—as in the singular self which exists before and moves among discursive fields—it artificially limits our ability to connect and create. Thinking through a Jamesian lens, we see why this is the case. Genres are concepts: tools we use to simplify and thus make sense of an unbearably complex reality. They are clean, whereas reality is messy. They are solid, whereas reality is fluid. Reality, in short, is *excessive*. By working solely in a clean conceptual space, genre theorists ignore this excess. This is a problem, because it is from the excess that new lines of connection, and thus discursive invention, inevitably arise. In real life, our hillbilly academic, having traced an absolutely singular life-path, would think and write and act in absolutely singular ways.<sup>10</sup> The moves by which she perverts cultural forms would likely be small, but they could be identified, and could be (and often are) leveraged to great effect. How can this occur? What animates her thought and language and allows her to transcend that which was previously thought and said, both by hillbillies and academics? The answer is her life experience—an absolutely unique accumulation of affective, material and discursive events. The idea of an individuated "self" captures this reality. Such a self is centered in the thinking-feeling body, but as queer theory (and William James) make clear, transcends that body. Genre theory, with their myopic focus on texts and forms, can't think such ideas. Hence, I'd argue, they overlook the individual writer's generative power.

Byron Hawk makes a similar point when he accuses social-epistemic rhetoric, another structuralist mode of thought, of ignoring "the entire context of tacit knowing that serves as the contextual ground for any heuristic discovery" (116). Yes. The tacit, that which we know, but which escapes

---

<sup>10</sup> This is inevitable because genres are ideal types and no individual case ever perfectly conforms to type.

codification: this is part of the excess which genre theory denies the writer. But it also denies her the deep well of what we carry with us and don't know, that which no one has ever known (yet). Genre theory, in short, elides life's inherent richness. It deals instead in inhuman abstraction, in frozen slices of experience. It tries to explain identity through these slices. In doing so, it presents an unrealistic picture of life and language, and puts artificial limits on what we can say, think and be.

#### 4.6 A NEW NEW MATERIALISM

In the above section, I critiqued genre theory from a materialist perspective. I claimed that by focusing exclusively on the formal and discursive—and ignoring the messiness of lived experience—it limits our potential for connection and creativity. As I've tried to make clear, at this cultural moment especially, we need theory which allows for maximum *interaction*. And this sort of theory will, by definition, be intimately bound to lived experience. Of course, I'm not alone in wishing to tap the generative power of the situated and embedded. As noted, we are in the midst of a “material turn” within rhetoric and composition. This is good. To its credit, new materialism makes plenty of room for the excess. My concern, though, is that in doing so, it too underestimates the individuated, thinking-feeling writer. In short, whereas genre theory renders the writer a mere product of discursive relations, new materialism dissolves her in a flux of material and affective relations. I'd like to suggest that in both cases, the outcome is the same: an artificial limit on what can be thought and felt.

To see how the new materialist conception of the self may be limiting, it's useful to look at one of the earlier and more sophisticated presentations of new materialist ideas in rhetoric and composition: Byron Hawk's *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. In this wide-ranging work, Hawk rehabilitates the philosophical concept of vitalism, arguing that it can help map our hyper-connected digital world. He unites thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Coleridge, Gilles Deleuze and Paul Kameen within a new paradigm he labels “complex vitality.” The complex vitalist paradigm, Hawk writes, is characterized by a focus on “systems, dynamic change, complexity... an emphasis on situatedness, and an acceptance of the unconscious or tacit elements of lived experience” (223). In this description, we spy the “relational ontology” which Laura Micciche claims defines new materialism. Simply put, for Hawk, relations, rather than individuated subjects or objects are primary. We should let

this idea guide our practice, he suggests. In our teaching and in our theory emphasis should be placed on “the material and affective ecologies that exist in and link” our lives and classrooms (224).

What becomes of identity in Hawk’s complex vitalist world? Well, first off, it must be noted that “identity,” as such, doesn’t appear in Hawk’s book. (Perhaps the term carries too many echoes of the fixed and stable, the self-contained and knowable.) What sort of beings interact in the classroom then? Hawk provides a hint in a discussion of ethos in the digital age. He quotes complexity theorist Mark Taylor’s description of “the self—if, indeed, this term any long[er] makes sense,” as “a node in a complex network of relations” (188). A node, as used here, is a knot comprised of different threads or fibers; it represents a brief moment of coherence in a field of randomness. Such an entity, Taylor writes, emerges “without any centralized agency or directing agent” (188). Building on this idea, Hawk argues that in a networked world, “the image of a single, central, stable subject,” must give way “to a multiplicity of selves,” emerging through relations with other bodies (189). In a discussion of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, he hits a similar note. The contemporary subject, he writes, is a “molar residual, off to the side, a side effect of desiring machines, not a single center from which desire is born” (165). Expression, in turn, is a “function... of ecological potential” (165).

In sum, we must say that the self, as presented in *A Counter-History*, is defined from without. It emerges in relation with others and objects, becoming “real” through (material) changes to its environment. Integrally, those changes come about not through self-generated force, but through the redirection of force already present in said environment (the actualization of “ecological potential”). The self, in this view, is like a prism, focusing energy received from the sun. As with much new materialist thought, such a take decentralizes agency. It turns our focus away from the individual, and towards what John Dewey would call *coordinations*: networks, systems, ecologies. It encourages us to study the movement of sunbeams, in other words, and not the construction of the prism.

Hawk’s interest in systems is not necessarily a bad thing. I have previously accused postcolonial theory and genre theory of using thought to keep objects and others at a distance. By foregrounding relational networks, Hawk, and other new materialists, seek to bring the world closer, to allow for more lines of connection. This is good. That said, in terms of identity, Hawk basically says what Trimbур and Bruffee said twenty years before—nothing starts with the writer, there is no individual, no agency. Now, as I read him, Hawk is primarily a rhetorician; perhaps his complex vitalist paradigm does important work in capturing the (necessarily abstract) nature of contemporary rhetoric. When applied to actual writers and writing instruction though, I’d like to suggest that his ideas fall short. In the writing classroom, after all, we don’t engage “molar residuals” or “desiring machines.” Instead, we engage students and student texts. We need a theory of identity geared towards helping us productively intervene at this level of scale. And as I’ve made clear, to allow for maximum interaction and invention, such a theory would have to

start with and in lived experience. It would have to acknowledge the reality of the individuated body, the individuated self and something that feels a hell of a lot like agency. Feminist theorists often make similar demands. Laura Micciche, for example, criticizes certain strains of new materialism for treating human bodies merely as “depoliticized effects” of complexity and networks (491). Such thought, she argues, shows an aversion to the “diverse fleshiness” of real people, in real spaces (491). Hawk is certainly not the worst offender in this regard.<sup>11</sup> I do think, though, that like new materialism writ large, his thought fails to sufficiently theorize life as it is lived.

So what’s the alternative? How can we formulate a theory of identity which acknowledges the felt reality of individuation, while simultaneously refusing to constitute the writer as a mere “social atom, an accounting unit” (Trimbur, qtd in Santos 5). The work of William James is instructive. James posits a world of relations—of reciprocity and interaction—but at same time, makes the thinking-feeling body the vibrant, generative center of experience. In doing so, I’d argue, he provides the blueprint for a new new materialism, one which operates on a human scale—the scale on which the work of writing and writing instruction actually takes place.

To better understand James’s vision, I’d like to turn to one of his well-known attacks on the “mechanical materialism” of famed social Darwinist Herbert Spencer. In “Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment,” James considers the nature of social development.<sup>12</sup> What causes communities to change over time? Spencer and his followers, James writes, believe that such changes occur independent of individual will or agency. “They are due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions... to everything, in fact, except the Grants and the Bismarcks, the Joneses and the Smiths” (218). In short, the Spencerian school holds that all change, social or otherwise, is the result of impersonal material forces. Individuals, their constructions and desires are mere effects.

While Hawk’s complex vitalism is not mechanical in nature, it resembles Spencer’s brand of materialism in that it privileges systems over agents, fields over figures. Yes, but so what? What’s wrong with taking a big picture view? Nothing in itself. Per James’s radical empiricism, remember, different, even opposing lines of thought and story can be equally valid. The key, when determining validity, is to find out who is asking and for what purpose. In making this point, James presents an image of a sparrow found dead on a city street. Certainly, he writes, that if we were to “alter the milky way, alter our federal constitution, alter the facts of our barbarian ancestry,” then the universe would be so different that the sparrow might still be alive (220). But he continues, if the purpose of our inquiry is punishment, say, it would be foolish to overlook the boy who threw a stone at the sparrow “as too

---

<sup>11</sup> As discussed in chapter two, Sydney Dobrin represents the apogee of “anti-subject” comp theory.

<sup>12</sup> This was originally a lecture, given to the Harvard Natural History Society. It was published in its current form in the October 1880 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*.



personal, proximate, and... anthropomorphic an agent” (220). There are “different cycles of operation in nature” (220). Sometimes, to get the job done, “we have to regard them as disconnected and irrelevant to one another” (221).

Always an empiricist, James works from the bottom up, takes parts and make wholes. In the case of the sparrow, this leads him to privilege the concrete and local over the abstract and distant. He narrows his field of focus, concentrates his energies on the most relevant parts of the coordination (with relevance determined by the goal of his inquiry). This mode of thought, when applied to social theory, causes him to look to the individual as an agent of change. Now, once again, this is not to say that the sparrow’s death cannot be classified as the molar residual of a desiring machine. It’s simply to say that within human affairs, this sort of abstraction is often not particularly useful. Depending on the purpose of our inquiry, it may be best to believe that a boy is simply a boy.

Of equal import is how James conceives the relationship between human thought and broader systems. Drawing on his psychological studies, he rejects the idea that the human mind is “passively plastic,” capable only of responding to and reproducing environmental stimuli (247). In doing so, he directly challenges Hawk’s conception of the individual as a “node” or prism which simply redirects external forces. Instead, in “those mental departments which are the highest,” new conceptions constantly appear in the form of “random images, fancies [and] accidental out-births of spontaneous variation” (247). The individual mind-body, in other words, inevitably alters those forces which work upon and through it. Social change, James concludes, is more than anything else, a result of the accumulated influence of these spontaneous, unpredictable perversions.

In the above argument we see the full-flowering of the ideas James hit upon in his moment of “death and rebirth.” We again see the individual as an active, world-making force. In his youth, remember, James was paralyzed by the idea that he was nothing but a “node.” Through resistance to this idea, he proved himself capable of agency. The same ability of embodied, embedded humans to overcome their embeddedness is now imputed to society as a whole. If we are to follow James, we must view writing and writing instruction through a similar lens. What, after all, is the writing act, but an attempt to overcome the limitations of our shared cultural forms? When we write, we strive to take ownership of language, make it ours, however provisionally. When we teach writing, we strive to help our students do the same. James assures us that this struggle is not in vein. Yes, our actions are limited, local. They may implicate the milky way, but they ultimately take place on the individual level, at the interface between self (or selves) and world. Though localized, such acts can have massive social consequence. Contra Hawk, James believes that the network does not make the node. Instead, *the nodes make the network*. Whatever potential may be inherent in discourse or desiring machines is only actualized, only becomes capable of impact, through the actions of (always situated, always embodied)

individuals. The boy throws the stone and the sparrow dies. The writer types the tweet and Trump becomes president. Of course, the structure of the milky way plays a role in each event; but it is not necessarily the prime mover. James allows us to believe this. And thus believe in ourselves.

Returning to the work of Byron Hawk, we can now see how, from a Jamesian perspective, a failure to account for the individual compromises his project. In a pedagogical call to action, Hawk writes that composition theorists should strive to “develop methods for situating bodies within ecological contexts in ways that reveal the potential for invention” (206). I agree completely. As discussed in previous chapters, to disrupt ossified thought structures we must find ways to unlock the excess inherent in the material world. We must remember, though, that this sort of change can only occur at the local level. As James makes clear, it is from real, individuated bodies—not discourses or fluxes—that “spontaneous variations” arise.<sup>13</sup> My claim is that Hawk and other new materialists, in privileging wholes over parts, abstract systems over lived experience, fail to sufficiently account for this fact. Now, admittedly, at least in regard to Hawk, it’s plausible that we don’t so much disagree, as his attention is directed elsewhere (to the ethereal heights of rhetorical theory, perhaps). He criticizes James Berlin, for example, for failing to recognize that “the body is the critical, epistemological link between situation and invention” (120). Yes. My claim is that those of us working in the materialist tradition need to do more to theorize this link. This will require a theory of identity which respects both relations and the inscrutable power of the individual self.

\*\*\*

So are Brianna and I nodes? Are we brief moments of coherence in a field of randomness? Certainly, I sometimes feel like a node, a point of intersection of Bob Dylan lyrics, humid Kansas summers and opaque biological processes. Then I try to repeat a story I’ve heard, or paraphrase some philosophical theory, and it comes out so peculiar and twisted that if I take a moment, I’m surprised at its singularity. My coherence is fleeting, but I read old emails and immediately recognize the language as “mine.” I have habits that I cannot break. And I’m quite certain that Brianna—such a conscientious dresser—imagines some sense of self-direction in her life, some sense of agency that does important work, and is thus “real” in the pragmatic sense. There are indeed different cycles of operation in nature. And in the classroom. Perhaps it is best to conceive of Brianna and Matt as simultaneous node and not-node, emanation from a field, and self-sustaining lines of force. The key, I suppose, is a theory of identity which allows for such complexity.

---

<sup>13</sup> I’m not claiming that bodies act alone. Variations always arise from the interaction of body and world (of course). My claim is simply that the role of the individual in the process of creation/invention has been devalued to too great of a degree by new materialist thought.

## 4.7 A JAMESIAN THEORY OF IDENTITY

The preceding sections have hinted at a new theory of identity for rhetoric and composition. We've seen that such a theory, to do its job, must respect both the singularity of lived experience and the broader contextual forces which shape that experience. It must acknowledge that the I is many and mutable—an ongoing performance—but also remarkably stubborn. William James can help us fill in this outline. In doing so we must keep two goals in mind. First, we need to strive for accuracy: we want our theory of identity to reflect life as it is lived by composition students and teachers. Second, we want our theory to open up new possibilities, to allow for increased intimacy, interaction and growth. So in short, the Jamesian theory of identity presented here should be understood as both descriptive and prescriptive. It is meant to reflect what is and what should be.

William James's primary contribution to notions of identity occurs in the chapter labeled "The Consciousness of Self," from his 1890 masterwork, *Principles of Psychology*. This chapter follows, and builds upon, James's idea of consciousness as a "stream of thought," in which each conscious pulse is both singular, and in unbroken sequence with those pulses before and after. Like that previous chapter, James's discussion of the self has proven widely influential (see Comello). His first, and perhaps boldest move, is to reject the need for any subject of experience, any essential self or "soul." Instead, he declares that "the passing thought... is itself the thinker" (PP 342). Each pulse of consciousness, he explains, knows its predecessors and all that they knew.<sup>14</sup> Apart from this "functional identity," there is no connection, no relation, between the I of the moment and the I of five minutes ago. In line with James's general approach in *Principles*, this is a very materialist move. From a material perspective, every thought occurs in a different place, at a different time, in a (slightly) modified brain: in a strictly physical sense, every thought is therefore utterly new, utterly distinct. As is every I.

It's easy to see how such a conception of self corresponds with James's idea of the individual as a singular, generative force. Because the thinker is always thinking itself anew, the possibility of mutation and invention is injected into every moment. By doing away with a transcendent subject or soul, James also allows for multiplicity, for conflict even, within the self. "The sense of our own personal identity," he writes, is nothing more than a felt perception of sameness, and "must not be taken to mean more than these grounds warrant" (PP 334). Even within the same individual, in other words, sameness exists alongside difference. I am, in a very real sense, the same man I was ten years ago. But I'm also different

---

<sup>14</sup> James uses the metaphor of ownership to describe the relationship between pulses. Each thought, he writes, is "born an owner, and dies owned, transmitting whatever it realized as its Self to its own later proprietor" (PP 339).

now than I've ever been. We've all felt similar sentiments. This conception of identity explains how this can be.

James's next move is to parse the self into the knower (the I) and the known (the Me). Taken together, this "duplex" self-conception frames our engagement with the world. "Whatever I may be thinking of," he writes, "I am always at the same time more or less aware of *myself*, of my *personal existence*. At the same time it is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, [is] as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject" (BC 176). As this indicates, the self is present in every thought, every action. The self is also multiple: both subject and object. As discussed above, as subject or knower, the self is pure thought. But what of the self as object or known? What is the Me? "In its widest possible sense," James writes:

...a man's Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (BC 177).

So a Me can contain any object. The decisive factor, what separates Me from not-Me, as James sees it, is *emotional connection*. Whenever a subject affectively bonds to an object—whenever his fortunes seem to get mixed up or bound to that object—it becomes part of that subject's Me.<sup>15</sup> It becomes part of his self, something that he carries with him and which shapes his engagement with the world.

Earlier, I referred to the Jamesian self as an "assemblage," a loosely bound set of disparate elements. We now see how this can be the case. The self for James is simultaneously material, social and spiritual, with the things we care about—whatever they may be—literally *becoming part of us*. Identity becomes a function of our body, our possessions, our relationships, our ideals. These all work together to shape our perception and how others perceive us. Understood in this way, the self emerges as both private and public, both solid and liquid.

Regarding the first point, for James, as we've seen, there's always an I. This I is utterly singular, utterly personal. The experience of the I is "subjective," in other words. The self, though, is not just the I, but also the entire web of affectively bound objects and others which constitutes the Me. These others and objects are largely "objective," in that they are available for empirical inspection. This duality allows the self to be both singular and plural, a monad and a network. It allows us to acknowledge that lived

---

<sup>15</sup> It's important to note that for James, feeling is material. It is the result of physical processes and is intersubjective in that it can spread from body to body. Personal experiences, Livingstone writes "are not the stuff of sovereign subjectivity but rather after-effects of impersonal and material processes that involve nerves, synapses, and guts," along with broad networks of things, crowds and moods (13). The latter trio impacts the former, producing what we know as sensation and emotion. Seen in this way, the Me can expand through (physical) encounter.

experience is utterly unknowable, but also communal. In short, it allows us to balance respect for the individual with respect for contextual forces.

James's theory of identity performs a similar balancing act in regard to fluidity. The Jamesian self is not a mere eddy, structural effect or "node." At the same time, though, it's boundaries are wildly indeterminate. The I as thinker is constantly thinking itself and its Me anew, remember. The Me is also in constant flux, as various objects enter and exit our emotional orbit. This indeterminacy allows for reinvention. But the self is not a total free agent. At all times, a hard nucleus of experience—our bodily welfare, for example—remains near the center of our attention, assuring continuity of the Me from one moment to the next. So identity is both mutable and stubborn. We are a collection of objects and opinions, constantly being reshuffled and rethought. Some arrangements may come easier than others, but alternative arrangements are always possible.

If we accept James's conception of identity, so what? What does this understanding of the self do? I'd argue that it does quite a lot. Political theorist Alexander Livingston, for example, argues that James's notion of identity allows for radical new forms of social organization. "In foregrounding the priority of felt relations," Livingstone writes, James "sketches the outlines of democratic individualism that is not *atomistic* but rather *molecular*: material, relational, porous, and conjunctive" (2). In other words, James presents a new way for humans to come together to get things done. Instead of the autonomous liberal/Cartesian subject or the structurally determined Marxian one, we have humans as emergent, attuned beings. For James, each individuated body is a "sounding board," immersed in a "cloud of experience" (Livingston 13). In such a world, agreement is not found in ideology, gods or metaphysics. Instead, it comes about through practice, through myriad acts of making that involve "the concerted effort of individuals constructing connections between a plurality of 'little worlds'" (Livingston 13). This is an embodied, material, local process. And integrally, it doesn't require conscious understanding. Instead, what is key is the encounter, the physical collision of ways of being. For James, remember, the self is indeterminate, in motion. When such beings collide, melding inevitably occurs.

Turning to the writing classroom, we see how James's notion of identity might inform our practice. As noted, for James, the world is riven, and the self is riven. Integrally, though, this plurality is a source of strength. At every level, alterity conditions growth. In our struggles to unite disparate forces within ourselves and our texts we gain strength and agency (like James in his moment of death and rebirth). Likewise, in the encounter with otherness, we are forced to look beyond what we know, thereby creating new conceptions, finding new sources of meaning, and ultimately, growing our selves. "Not only the people but the places and things I know enlarge my Self," James writes (PP 308). Yes. Exactly. This sort of expansion is what writing instruction should encourage: it's how we smash the hegemony of the fragments. If James is right, it occurs first and foremost through the avoidance of conceptual barriers

to intimacy. In short, we have to think and act in ways which allow singular selves to come into contact on singular terms. If we can do so, selves will expand and fragments will dissolve.

\*\*\*

So what would William James make of Brianna? What would he make of me? Well, through a Jamesian lens, Brianna is first and foremost an individual. She's a thinking-feeling being, constantly (re)constructing her self and her world. Within this reconstruction there's bound to be mutation, invention—absolutely original creation. There's also bound to be fissure, fracture. This plurality is generative, though. Through the struggle to unite her disparate selves—and attune those selves to a fractured world—Brianna can gain strength and purpose. She can expand her Me, come to know and care for more people, places, ideas and ideals.

James would also draw our attention to all that Brianna carries into my classroom. She is extravagant necklaces, iced coffee, Isiah Berlin, Black Lives Matter, a sharp (rather acerbic) wit, a mother in the Army, AP English, Jim Crow, her classmates' perception of her, my perception of her, Tumblr, Stevie Wonder, press-on nails, etc., etc. This is the assemblage which is Brianna. It shapes how she moves through the world and it shapes my interaction with her. Of course, the center of Brianna is always shifting—she doesn't care much for Stevie Wonder anymore, perhaps—but all these elements are there, to some degree. And they are always open to reevaluation.

As Brianna's teacher, my task is to guide Brianna's arrangement of self into the most expansive form possible. I encourage critique and creation, draw attention to the fact that Brianna is very much in process. I provide alterity—in the form and content of the texts we read, in the ideas we discuss, and in my own physical presence. (Alterity, remember, acts as a stimulus to growth.) Here, James would be quick to remind us that truly intimate relations are defined by reciprocity. Growth can and must be mutual. Through the collision of open systems, melding occurs. My fortune gets bound up with my students, they become "mine," part of my Me, and hence part of my self. Long after the semester ends, the trace remains. This, I suppose, is why months after our final class, I'm still trying to make sense of my encounter with Brianna. In Jamesian terms, our relationship was one of great intimacy. It was therefore of great import.

## 5. WRITING THE FRAGMENTS

### 5.1 THE RHETORIC OF THE FRAGMENTS

I begin this chapter eight months after the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. As noted in the introduction, for many writing teachers, Trump's election was a traumatic event. The intervening months have been equally so. Reared in filter bubbles and fueled by feedback loops, voices have only grown more shrill, more extreme. Glancing at the *Washington Post*, I see legendary political reporter Carl Bernstein claiming that America is in a "cold civil war," in which "fact-based debate" between opposing viewpoints has become impossible. Whether the topic is tax policy, vaccines or TV shows, the conventional wisdom is that "America is more divided than ever." Survey data supports such a view (see Pew). In chapter one, I argued that this fragmentation both arises from and contributes to the ossification of cognitive practices. Simply put, it is now harder than ever for the average citizen to engage productively with difference. This is the *hegemony of the fragments*, and it represents a state of affairs with which composition, as a socially engaged enterprise, must contend.

That's the bad news. The good news is that as writing teachers, every time we step into the classroom we have a chance to challenge this state of affairs. The stakes are high. The struggle will be a difficult one and success is not guaranteed. From a Jamesian perspective, though, adversity is to be cherished because it allows for heroism. James, remember, found moral courage in "the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world." In asserting his free will in the face of forces which sought to deny him that right, he proved himself an active agent. His life and language thus took on meaning which to this day resonates throughout the *socius*. It seems to me that the hegemony of the fragments presents

writing teachers with a similar opportunity. Here is an idea, a cause, a mission with the ability to knit together and enrich innumerable everyday acts of teaching and learning. In doing so, it gives us a reason (or another reason) to keep engaging whole-heartedly in such acts. Of course, any gains had will be small. No matter. To follow William James is to recognize the power of the local, to take solace and strength from “disseminated and strung-along successes” (P 117). Little victories are an integral part of teaching. Resistance to the hegemony of the fragments can endow each with new meaning.

If we agree that social fragmentation is a problem, what should we do? What should we not do? Let’s take the latter question first. I suggest that writing teachers, if we are to challenge the fragments, must scrupulously avoid discursive practices which merely *exploit* fragmentation. We see such exploitation in political rhetoric that seeks to gin up hate or fear, for example. We also see it, though, anytime a writer denies the world’s complexity in order to promote his interests or those of groups he claims to represent. Now, admittedly, when tensions run high and gaps in perception seem unbridgeable, there is a strong incentive to turn inward, to ignore complexity and more fervently embrace the thought and story of our side, our tribe. If I’m right though, and if William James is right, we can’t challenge fragmentation via exclusion. The other’s desire, even if seemingly evil or illogical, is real. It’s a real force in the world and every self must learn to take account of it. Writing teachers can help students do this, I believe, by promoting discursive practices which bend and flex, and thus open up new, more inclusive ways of thinking and being. In short, we need to engage in pedagogical practices which help students come to terms with the perplexing, often repulsive ways of the other. In the previous pages I’ve argued that William James provides a philosophical system—a metaphysics, an ethical scheme and a theory of identity—which makes plurality both inevitable and desirable. My claim now is that a similar inflection can work to revitalize composition. It can provide writing teachers with a renewed sense of purpose, both in the classroom and on a disciplinary level. Turning to James once again, this chapter will present a model of composition—specifically first-year composition—which connects our field to the rich tradition of liberal arts education (of which James is an integral part). Such a model makes it our mission to help students develop the habits of mind necessary to deal productively with difference. In short, it seeks to help them live and write in a fragmented age.



## 5.2 TO KNOW A GOOD PERSON WHEN YOU SEE THEM

As noted, the work of William James cannot (and should not) be translated directly into a lesson plan. One of his core principals, remember, is the singularity of every situation, the utterly contextual nature of all knowledge. It is therefore up to the individual teacher to find the right pedagogical formula, the right name for her particular case. In his *Talks to Teachers* lecture series, in fact, James takes pains to remind teachers of this responsibility. His psychological theories are science, while “teaching is an art,” thereby requiring an “intermediary inventive mind” to adapt one to the other (TT 7). To think otherwise is a “very great mistake” (TT 7). Of course, James has specific views as to the nature of education and the educational enterprise; he devotes, after all, an entire lecture series to the topic. The following pages will survey some of these opinions. In accord with James’s wishes though, they will be treated as catalyst, rather than dogma. I will use James’s thought to sketch a writing pedagogy uniquely suited to the classroom as I know it. I encourage my reader to do the same.

*Talks to Teachers* is an apt place to begin formulating a Jamesian-inspired writing pedagogy. As previously discussed, in this series of lectures, published as a book in 1899, James sought to put recent advances in academic psychology to educational use. In a fond remembrance written in 1911, a year after James’s death, Bird Baldwin, one of his former students, credits James with being among the first to take an “empirical and experimental” approach to educational theory (369). Baldwin describes James, in *Talks*, as adopting the “biological point of view,” holding first and foremost that “man is a practical being whose mind is given him to aid him in adapting... to this world’s life” (375). The text’s discussion of habit, instinct, and the child’s “native tendencies,” in Baldwin’s view, have proven particularly influential.<sup>1</sup> As this line indicates, *Talks* deals primarily with the learning processes of school children. Still, no matter the learner, the biological can’t be discounted. As such, an examination of this text’s core principles can prove useful.

So within *Talks*, how does James understand education? First off, it should be noted that education, for James, is more than just the transfer of information or the mastery of discrete skills. Instead, its central aim is to help students respond to their world in more productive ways. In *Talks*, James phrases this idea in terms of “training to behavior.” Education, he writes:

---

<sup>1</sup> One-hundred years on, the influence of James’s educational thought is harder to judge. Pajares, in the most thorough examination of the subject, views James as a forerunner of the child-centered progressive education movement (largely through his influence on John Dewey). That said, James, unlike Dewey, clearly has what would today be considered old-fashioned tendencies. As Pajares puts it, he takes a “no-nonsense approach,” stressing freedom and compulsion in equal measure (55).

...consists in the organizing of resources in the human being, of powers of conduct which shall fit him to his social and physical world. An 'uneducated' person is one who is nonplussed by all but the most habitual situations. On the contrary, one who is educated is able practically to extricate himself...from circumstances in which he never was placed before. Education, in short, cannot be better described than by calling it *the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior* (TT 29).

In this definition, we see hints of James's Darwinian influence. Humans in this view are practical, embodied creatures, constantly required to respond to novel environmental demands. Through trial and error, communities have developed systems to help their members respond to such demands. Education is the transmission of this cultural legacy. But what exactly is transmitted? Education, James writes later in *Talks*, involves the organization of "determinate tendencies to associate one thing with another" (83). So, for James, learning is learning how to *read* situations, how to make the most productive connections. Certain environmental cues implicate certain conceptual and affective webs, triggering certain behaviors. The goal of education is to make these reactions more "numerous and perfect" (TT 38). "The more copious the associative systems, the completer the individual's adaptations to the world" (TT 83).

Integrally, learning as James's understands it, implicates both body and mind. By focusing on habits and behavior James captures both the conscious and unconscious, conceptual and tacit elements of the learning process. It is not enough for a student to *think* in certain ways. To "fit her social and physical world" she must also learn to feel and act in certain ways. For James, these different elements of experience inevitably intertwine, with concepts spurring action, action spurring feelings, feelings spurring concepts, etc. In short, James's vision of education, as presented in *Talks*, can be said to be *radically holistic*. We learn in order to live in the world. And life, by definition, is always intellectual, affective and material. Learning must be likewise.

Apart from *Talks*, James most direct statement of educational principles can be found in "The Social Value of the College Bred," an address delivered at Radcliffe in 1907. This work differs from *Talks* in both context and content. In *Talks*, James speaks as an psychologist dispensing practical advice to a paying audience. In "Social Value," delivered late in his career and to a group of college alumni, James assumes the role of philosopher and general man of letters. This pose allows him to take a more prescriptive approach. The forum also allows him to address college education directly (a rare occurrence for James). For our purposes, then, "Social Value" is a key text.

The question addressed in "Social Value" is simple: what does a college education do? James's answer is equally simple: a college education "helps you know a good man when you see him." This answer is pithy, a bit glib even, but I'd argue it hints at James's investment in a tradition which shapes university education to this day. In particular, James signals his commitment to what we might call the

liberal arts or liberal education. He makes this investment clear via a comparison of the “colleges” with business or professional schools. At the latter, he writes, a student receives a narrow, practical education, becoming an “efficient instrument for doing a definite thing,” and thus capable of judging “a good job in his own line” (MS 132). The former, on the other hand, “although they may leave you less efficient for this or that practical task, suffuse your whole mentality with something more important than skill” (MS 131). They leave you with “the critical sense,” the ability to judge “a good human job anywhere” (MS 133). What the colleges teach, in other words, “is a general sense of what, under various disguises, superiority has always signified and may still signify” (MS 133).

James admits that the above definition is vague (necessarily so). At first blush, it also doesn’t seem particularly original, echoing, for example, Matthew Arnold’s fetishization of culture. For James though, we can say that process, rather than product is key. He doesn’t claim that Harvard, for example, teaches the good: only that it teaches students how to *identify* the good. This distinction is key. As is the fact that for James, an understanding of the good, arises not from purity, but from plurality. In the university as James conceives it, students are exposed to different types of excellence, different forms of human achievement. They engage these objects “humanistically,” which means putting them in context, understanding how and why they came to be. Such thought is humanistic because for James, how and why always implicate human desire, human ideals. This recognition results in a general broadening of sensibly. “All our arts and sciences and institutions,” he writes,

are but so many quests for perfection on the part of men; and when we see how diverse the types of excellence may be, how various the tests... we gain a richer sense of what the terms "better" and "worse" may signify in general. Our critical sensibilities grow both more acute and less fanatical. We sympathize with men's mistakes even in the act of penetrating them; we feel the pathos of lost causes and misguided epochs even while we applaud what overcame them (MS 133).

In *Talks*, James spoke of education as providing students with “more copious associative systems.” Here we see the same idea presented in literary form. The college bred subject, as described here, sees (and feels) the big picture.<sup>2</sup> She becomes more sympathetic, capable of recognizing the good in all its various guises. This new perspective entails deep personal change. And for James, such change results from exposure to (and entanglement with) alien desire as encapsulated in diverse forms of human excellence. Of course, this sort of education is affective as much as conceptual. This is the reality that he tries to capture with his quip that a college education “helps you know a good man when you see him.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Referencing chapter four, we can say that this process involves an “expansion of the Me.”

\*\*\*

Earlier, I said that I wish to use James's educational thought as a catalyst. Given our current political situation, "Social Value" feels particularly catalytic. Perhaps my reading is skewed, but near the midpoint of this text, William James—typically upbeat, an American optimist—actually seems to be *angry*. "Democracy is on trial," he writes, "and no one knows how it will stand the ordeal" (MS 134). Undoubtedly referring to America's newfound imperialistic impulse (against which he fervently agitated), he laments that "the picture-papers of the European continent are already drawing Uncle Sam with the hog instead of the eagle for his heraldic emblem" (MS 134). It is against this backdrop that James frames the mission of liberal education. He recognizes that "critical sense... is hardly a banner to carry in processions," but sees such sense as integral to the survival of democracy (MS 135). He compares the role of teachers, and the educated class in general, to the pilot of a ship. Though reactionary habits and vulgar self-interest are powerful forces, like wind and waves, they are inconsistent, often contradictory. The pilot's hand upon the tiller, though a much smaller force, is steady. This grants it great power. "The ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals," he writes, "the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, *must* warp the world in their direction" (MS 135).

I'd like to suggest that in his reference to a "ceaseless whisper" James locates both the goal and method of liberal education. College educators are not partisans, he would say, but philosophers, defined first and foremost by generosity of spirit. Though attentive engagement with the widest possible array of goods, we provide a model, an example, of what the world could be. Though the immediate results of such practice are small, James is certain that they accrue over time. The key, he suggests, is to maintain a steady course. Liberal educators can't get carried away by "currents of self-interest, and gales of passion" (MS 135). We can't let the din of the present (and our desire to change that present) distract us from larger truths, bigger pictures, more permanent ideals. This is something that I believe every writing teacher, fed up with fake news and filter bubbles, would do well to keep in mind.

### 5.3 COMPOSITION AS LIBERAL EDUCATION

In the previous section I discussed some of William James's thoughts regarding education. We've seen that education, for James, is the organization of habit, with the goal being to allow the individual to better respond to his or her environment. College education is distinguished by its scope. Here, students learn more productive modes of evaluating experience writ large. The changes sought by such a program have deep moral implications. They also serve practical ends. As we've seen, for James, the mode of thought cultivated in the university is intimately tied to democratic politics. At the most basic level, we can't have one without the other.

I believe that James's educational thought, when read in light of his larger body of work, provides a blueprint for what we should be doing in the writing classroom, circa 2017. Because he was a psychologist and philosopher, though, and not a writing teacher, we must be the ones who build a Jamesian writing pedagogy. What form might such a pedagogy take? Frank Pajares, in a recent summary of James's educational thought, provides a hint. He agrees that James would reject what we today call "the banking model" of education. Instead of merely transmitting information, the goal of a Jamesian pedagogy is "to help students learn how to evaluate the information available to them" (55). In the writing classroom, I'd suggest, this translates to a focus on the student and the student's interpretive systems. Not a focus on text or tools. Right away, such a statement might seem counterintuitive. Writing is a tool. Hence, writing instruction must focus on tools, right? Not necessarily. Thinking with James, I envision a more *humane* mode of writing instruction. It would recognize that changes in writing ability are, at heart, changes in people. While outside of mainstream comp thought at the moment, such an approach has links to both existing composition pedagogies and broader traditions within higher education.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as I envisioned it, a Jamesian writing pedagogy connects to ideas that have animated the modern American university since its founding.<sup>4</sup> I speak here of the tradition of the liberal arts.

A useful history of the liberal arts can be found in Louis Menand's *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*. Surprisingly, Menand claims that what we know as the liberal arts education isn't some holdover from the deep past. Instead, it's a twentieth-century invention, corresponding with the rise of the research university (1880 to 1920). The research university is defined by specialization; it's basically a machine for sorting researchers by discipline and students by

---

<sup>3</sup> In chapter one, we saw that Scott and Welch have recently lamented composition's "textual fixation." Robert Yagelski, drawing on Donald Murray and the dawn of the process era, has made similar claims.

<sup>4</sup> Considering that William James was an influential figure at the nation's top university during the development of the modern university system, this is not surprising.

major. The idea of “liberal education” emerged to counter complaints that such a system encouraged over-specialization and a focus on esoterica.<sup>5</sup> Of course, at different times and sites, what constitutes such an education has varied. As we’ve seen, for James, a liberal education involves exposure to plurality, to differing conceptions of excellence, which in turn promotes intellectual and ethical growth. According to the classification scheme Menand presents, such a view corresponds with the “distribution system” of general education. This mode of structuring curriculum holds that liberal education is not reducible to any specific body of knowledge or product (familiarity with the *Iliad* and Wordsworth, for example). Instead, “liberal learning is the sea in which the various departmentalized fields of study, from physics to poetry, all swim. It’s a background mentality... a kind of intellectual DNA” (24). Transmission of this mentality or disposition, over and above any specific skill set or body of knowledge, is the primary goal of the college experience. Of course, the exact attributes associated with a “liberally educated disposition” change from time to time. The key, from this perspective, is that however loosely defined, there is some shared way of being among educated people, this way of being can be transmitted (or more specifically, reproduced), and that doing so can have positive social impact.<sup>6</sup> As we’ve seen, James would agree with each of these claims.

I mention the tight bond between William James and certain notions of liberal education to suggest where a composition pedagogy informed by James might take us. A Jamesian writing pedagogy is not going to be about the transfer of a body of knowledge (regarding the nature of the written discourse, for example), and it’s not going to be about the mastery of discrete skills (performance of textual conventions, say). Instead, it’s going to be more holistic, more generalist, more eclectic. Its subject is the student and the student’s experience understood in the broadest sense possible. A Jamesian writing pedagogy uses writing as a means to explore and enrich this experience, with the goal being to create the kind of people we want to see more of in the world: more generous, thoughtful, creative people. Of course, as we work towards personal transformation, we impart knowledge about discourse, spur the mastery of textual conventions. James would hold though that these aspects of our work, while important, are secondary. Or perhaps more accurately, in light of the holistic nature of his educational thought, he would hold that this “practical” aspect of writing instruction can’t be separated from the transformative aspect. Changes in writing ability are, after all, changes in people.

---

<sup>5</sup> So the idea of a broad-based, liberal education developed as a means to fight fragmentation. This makes it a natural ally in the struggle against the hegemony of the fragments.

<sup>6</sup> The existence of a shared disposition doesn’t mean one disposition. For James, context is king, remember. That means that whether a certain thought or action corresponds with a “liberal disposition” can only be determined with reference to a specific time and place. Despite this indefiniteness, James would argue that the concept is “real” (in a pragmatic sense) because it is of consequence. For example, it can give us a felt sense of a shared mission, an ideal by which to evaluate specific ideas or actions.

\*\*\*

Though, as noted, the idea of writing instruction as a holistic, transformative venture isn't exactly the norm these days, it's not totally alien either. A Jamesian vision of composition, we can say, isn't about destroying our field in order to rebuild it anew; instead it's about evolution. The compatibility of my proposal with some of composition's core values can be illustrated with reference to 2011's *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. Drafted by a panel of writing teachers and drawing on the latest research in writing and writing pedagogy, this document is a joint publication of the field's three top administrative bodies: The Council of Writing Program Administrators, The National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. Its goal is to define what it means for a student to be "college ready." Integrally, it does so not with reference to typical academic standards, but through a discussion of "habits of mind"—intellectual and behavioral tendencies. According to the *Framework*, to succeed in higher education, students must display curiosity, openness to experience, creativity and cognitive flexibility, among other habits. Rather than being extraneous, it argues that these personal traits are essential to both good writing and general academic success. It also holds that such habits can be cultivated in the writing classroom. Kristine Johnson, in an analysis of this document and the motivations behind it, writes that through a focus on habits of mind, "the *Framework* reframes a widespread narrative about written products and quantified achievements with an alternative narrative about writers and their development" (518). It "asks writing teachers to address the person behind writing products and processes," to consider "*who* writers should become and *why* they should become that way" (527).

Right away, the connection between the *Framework* and my own project is apparent. As with James, here we have education understood not as the transfer of information or mastery of skills, but as the cultivation of behavioral tendencies. We also see a focus on development, transformation even. In other words, underlying the *Framework* is the idea that via experiences in the writing classroom, students can be changed and that these changes—though not necessarily predictable or even identifiable except in vague terms—can be of impact far beyond the page. A Jamesian vision of writing instruction is based upon the same principles. Within this scheme, it's not that *either* we teach writing *or* engage in a more holistic process of development. Instead, as the *Framework* shows, we can and must do both. James is particularly relevant at the moment, I'd argue, because he provides guidance as to how we can satisfy this dual charge. He shows us how to think in ways which refuse to separate mind from body, writing from writer, word from world. In doing so, a Jamesian approach, we can say, both draws from, and works to advance, ideas very near to composition's heart.

## 5.4 FORMS OF INTELLECTUAL & ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

So a Jamesian writing class is developmental in nature, focusing on the whole person as opposed to disciplinary knowledge or discrete skills. Such a move aligns composition with the tradition of liberal arts education. To James, as we've seen, this tradition means the development of a more nuanced system of evaluation, the ability "to know a good person when you see them." Similar sentiments run throughout defenses of liberal education. Historian William Cronon, for example, writes that the liberally educated person should be capable of "reading" the world—as in appreciating, if not understanding—myriad aspects of experience, from *A Room With a View* to the *National Enquirer* to extraordinary athletic achievement. "More than anything else," he writes, to be liberally educated entails "being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways" (5). To see connections and mobilize them—this aptly describes the sort of enhanced meaning-making ability necessary to disrupt the hegemony of the fragments. And as is apparent, it demands practice in both reading and writing.

So if we take Cronon's description to be a suitable goal for composition pedagogy, what next? How can we get a better grasp on what a Jamesian-inspired, composition-as-liberal-arts class might look like? One way is to examine educational environments and educational theories influenced by William James. William Perry's *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: a Scheme* is one such work.

Originally published in 1970, and drawing on interviews of Harvard undergraduates from the 1950s and 1960s, Perry's *Forms* seeks to chart the cognitive changes spurred by a college education. The book has proven widely influential. To my knowledge, though, no one has explored the connection between William James and *Forms*. This is odd, because James is everywhere in the text. Only two generations removed from James's lifetime, the Harvard of *Forms* is still very much a Jamesian place. Perry quotes James; students mention reading James; and interviews are conducted in the shadow of William James Hall (home of the psychology and sociology departments). By paying close attention to the environment described and the changes it spurs, we can get a better picture of what exactly a Jamesian education entails.

Perry himself acknowledges his pragmatist legacy, writing that his study "shares the assumptions of modern contextualistic pragmatism" (226). This view holds that humans are purposeful actors, seeking to think in ways which help them survive and thrive. "The students' ultimate purpose," Perry writes, is "to find those forms through which they may best understand and confront with integrity the nature of the human condition" (226). The goal of education, in turn, is to help students develop more productive



forms of thought, modes of thinking (and thus acting) best suited to the context in which they dwell. So right away we see in Perry, as with James, a focus on adaptation, on learning to think in ways which serve productive ends. Such a valuation is always context determinate, of course. Hence Perry's claim that he adheres to the "contextualistic" paradigm.

The idea of forms, or structures of thought, is essential to Perry's project. Forms, he writes, are "the structures which the students explicitly or implicitly impute to the world" (1). In simple terms, we can say that forms are baseline assumptions—they tell a thinker how the world is, thus providing guidance for thought and action. Perry is particularly interested in the ways in which students understand knowledge, value and responsibility. What is the origin and nature of knowledge? How do items or ideas acquire value? When and why might one be responsible to another? Perry's primary claim is that through the four years of a liberal arts education, how students answer such questions passes through an identifiable series of changes. *Forms* is based on the premise that via student interviews Perry and his team can suss out and taxonomize these changes.

Perry's taxonomy contains nine potential positions, or stages, with each successive stage capable of perceiving and coming to terms with a greater level of complexity. The stages are grouped as the dualist, multiplistic and relativistic positions. In the early stages (dualism) the student perceives the world in unqualified, absolute terms: an idea is either right or wrong, an action is either good or bad. In the middle stages (multiplicity) her world is fragmented: she believes there's no right or true answers, only different, equally valid interpretations. In the final stage (relativism), the student realizes that claims as to truth and value can indeed be judged, and that some claims are inevitably better than others based on context and coherence. Finally, according to Perry, the most advanced sort of student reaches a place of "committed relativism." From such a position she is able to "affirm his own commitments in a world of contingent knowledge and relative values" (3). In short, she's able to believe wholeheartedly, while recognizing that she could (and others do) believe otherwise.

Upon its publication, Perry's scheme received a good deal of attention in the composition literature (see Berthoff, Burham, Hays). Some, like Janice Hays, praised Perry's idea of stages as a useful way to gauge students' abilities and thus tailor instruction appropriately. Others, like Ann Berthoff criticized Perry, and developmental models in general, as too rigid and linear, and thus not respecting the complexity of the learning process. In what is perhaps the field's most widely read critique—"William Perry and Liberal Education," from 1984—Patricia Bizzell takes a compromise position. She warns against applying Perry's scheme too rigidly, but ultimately finds his work useful. Perry reminds us, she argues, that teaching is always a value-laden endeavor: we're not just teaching students to think, but teaching them to think in certain ways. By charting the modes of thought that the academy values, Perry provides "a sort of philosophical map of the changes liberal education seeks to induce" (160).

I generally agree with Bizzell. As she suggests, taken in the abstract, Perry's scheme provides a good overview of what intellectual and ethical growth—which, per chapter three, is composition's ultimate imperative—might look like. Integrally, though, *Forms* also provides particularly well-timed guidance as to how we can spur such growth. The problem we face in the Trumpian age, remember, is a widespread inability to make productive use of difference. This sort of sense-making is something at which the Harvard of William Perry, shaped by the thought of William James, excels. At its core, liberal education in the James-Perry mode is about bringing young people into a *controlled encounter with difference*. Through this process, students develop the habits of mind necessary to operate in a pluralistic universe (which for both Perry and James represents the very essence of the human condition). I see this sort of program as highly relevant to our current social milieu. As I have argued, constantly confronted with “more,” our thought has grown ossified; it has become more difficult to conceive “the other guys” as anything but other. Perry shows us what it looks like to overcome such solipsism.

By way of illustration, let's look at a student interview. Near the mid-point of *Forms*, Perry writes of a freshman who describes himself as coming from a “small town. Midwest... where... everyone believed the same things. Everyone's a Methodist and everyone's a Republican” (78). In his dormitory at Harvard this student encountered, much to his amazement, “quite a variety” of people: “Catholic, Protestant,” even “a Chinese boy whose parents follow the teachings of Confucianism” (78). He speaks of late-night discussions about religion and politics, some of which he found “quite disturbing.” Though this student can't quite articulate it, he knows that the encounter with difference represented by these discussions *did* something, and that this something is related to “the academic situation,” to the “attitudes of the professors” and the texts he's been assigned (78). Not coincidentally, his answers to an accompanying survey reveal a sudden wavering in his belief in a single absolute truth. Given these data points, Perry sees a young person on the verge of a transition from position one (dualism) to position two (multiplicity). Put another way, here is an individual emerging from a fragment. As of yet, he can't make sense of the change. Likewise, he's not quite willing to accept the reality of utter difference (there may be students in his dorm who *say* they're atheists, but they're *really not*). Still though, here's a student clearly on his way to more flexible, open, creative modes of thought. So how do the liberal arts promote this sort of development?

The first thing we learn from examining the Harvard of *Forms* is the importance of exposure to difference. Whether in the courses they take or the makeup of their dormitories, students are physically

confronted with the reality of different ways of thinking and being.<sup>7</sup> As Perry puts it, for these students, “pluralism forcefully demands legitimacy” (79). And it is the granting of legitimacy to that which is other—a process compelled by both authority and practical reality—that first allows the parochial nature of one’s own views to come into consciousness. The students see that there are indeed other ways of thinking and doing. To account for this fact, their interpretive systems must change.

Of course, simple exposure to difference—what we could call pure practice—doesn’t act alone. Instead, exposure only works to bring the student’s set of baseline assumptions into the foreground “where transformations in its structure may occur” (79). So how does transformation actually occur, then? It seems to me that in the Perry model thought structures are transformed when students are moved to actively *account* for the disparate elements in their environment. Perry makes this clear when he writes of the pedagogical implications of his study. If development is seen as the goal, he argues, “the good teacher becomes one who supports in his students a more sustained groping, exploration, and synthesis” (237). The term *synthesis* is key here. The student must learn to account for, to make sense of—to synthesize—that which was previously unaccountable (or simply ignored). For example, the student in the above interview must develop a set of baseline assumptions which allow for the existence of atheists at Harvard. Simply put, in his new reality, this is a fact of which he must account. A liberal arts pedagogy provides him the opportunity to do so.

The above analysis indicates that growth, as Perry sees it, requires engagement with the world. It requires inquiry (“sustained groping”) and constant striving to make sense of what one finds. As noted though, meta-cognition—the ability to think about one’s own thinking—is also integral to the developmental process. In fact, for Perry, meta-cognition seems to underpin the whole affair. The progression through the various developmental stages, he writes, “is from thinking to meta-thinking, from man as knower to man as critic of his own thought” (79). Likewise, the end product—the liberally educated person—“be he a graduate of college or not, is one who has learned to think about even his own thoughts, to examine the way he orders his data... and to compare these with other thoughts that other men might have” (44).

Perry seems to think that metacognition cannot be taught. But this is not to say that it can’t be encouraged. How? Metacognition is a habit, a tendency towards behavior; it is thus encouraged by modeling, mimicry, and other indirect forms of instruction. Time and time again Perry notes the importance of the student feeling he is part of a community of learners. The student must be confirmed as a member of this community; he must consider himself a fellow meaning-making, part of a larger project.

---

<sup>7</sup> I recognize that for moderns, the idea of Harvard of the 1950s being “diverse” may seem a bit ridiculous. We must remember though that the notion of diversity is relative. As the interview with the above student shows, compared with many students’ home cultures, Harvard is decidedly polyglot.

This “enjoins upon educators a certain openness—a visibility in their own thinking, groping, doubts, and styles of Commitment,” Perry argues (239). Displays of uncertainty—and reflection on the potential limits of one’s cognitive machinery—are essential to this sort of socialization. Indeed, developmental change, Perry writes, often comes from seeing professors in the “act of puzzling” (99). Here, once again, Perry echoes James. For James, remember, learning is more than the accumulation of information: it’s a full-bodied process, affective, material and intellectual. In recognizing the importance of being together and thinking together, Perry presents learning as a similarly holistic affair.

So professors and peers act as models for the student to draw upon in his efforts to make sense of the world. Textual resources are also made available. The student in the above transcript, for example, mentions reading Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and of course, William James. Perry himself writes that college should “present to the students’ attention in concentrated form all the questions that the sophomore in man has raised for himself through the ages” (37). Indeed, engagement with complex, self-reflective texts seems essential to the development traced in *Forms*. Such texts present varied modes of excellence in human achievement, William James would say. Integrally though, the excellent is not in the answers they provide. Instead, it’s in the questions they raise, and the processes by which the authors go about resolving these questions. So reading, we can say, once again, help situate students in a community. This community, though, is larger than a single college or culture. It’s a global community of writers and thinkers, of humans endeavoring to make sense of the world. At the most basic level, liberal education is an effort to integrate young people into this community.

\*\*\*

From dualism, to multiplicity, to relativism, to committed relativism: earlier I said that Perry’s developmental scheme is most useful when understood in the abstract. Indeed, while still widely respected, some of Perry’s specific claims have been challenged. For example, some now believe that students don’t so much “stage” as utilize different baseline assumptions in different contexts (see King). It also seems to me that in the digital age pure dualism is rare among college students.<sup>8</sup> That said, there seems to be a commonsense element to Perry’s work. He himself writes that the often traumatic discovery of diversity is part of “the folklore of adolescence” (3). It’s certainly a part of my story.

In the late-1990s, someone taped the Modern Library’s list of the 100 best twentieth-century novels to the end of a bookshelf in the Augusta, Kansas public library. At maybe eighteen, I came across this list and it was a revelation. Here, finally, I thought, were the facts, *the best novels*, not some high school teacher’s mere preference. I made it my mission to read all 100. It seems ridiculous now, but I

---

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Perry predicts this, noting that the switch from dualism to multiplicity appears to be occurring “earlier and earlier in life” (4). Another sign of the fragmented nature of our world, perhaps?

never thought of the Modern Library's list as opinion, as something that could be contested. Then I left Augusta and went off to the University of Kansas. It didn't happen overnight, of course, but at some point I started to realize that most people—even people who liked to read—hadn't seen this list. They had their own ideas about which novels were important, often based on completely different criteria. This revelation, for lack of a better term, fucked me up. It made me not want to talk about novels, or even read them, for quite a long time. If there's no set standard, I remember thinking, what's the point in investing my time in a novel? How can I be sure it's any good?

I did eventually start reading fiction again. I developed criteria by which to judge whether a book is of value and though I can't force anyone to feel the same way, I do think I can make a pretty good case that say, *Kim*, is truly a great work of fiction. This change represents intellectual and ethical growth, Perry would say. And I'm inclined to agree. Through education in the broadest sense—though exposure and adaptation to the excess inherent in the world—my perception grew both broader and more acute. Though the details will differ, I suspect that many of my readers can trace a similar movement in their own lives. Perry's work captures this shared experience. That's why it remains relevant.

## 5.5 THE HUMANIST HOPE

The above argues that William Perry's mid-century Harvard provides the beginnings of a blueprint for a Jamesian writing pedagogy. Of course, caveats apply. I recognize that the world I've been describing is now often understood as elitist, exclusive, dominated by a narrow (white, male) form of subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> I suspect that this reading is accurate. I also believe, though, that the underlying logic of the system is sound: something off which we can build. And besides, in turning to the Jamesian tradition we're looking for inspiration, remember, not instruction. We should therefore feel free to take what we like from Perry, or James even, and discard the rest.

So what might a writing course based on the principles of liberal education look like? Well, as we've seen, it would emphasize the pluralistic nature of both perception and reality. It makes this pluralism real by staging encounters with difference (in the form of the teacher, fellow students, alien

---

<sup>9</sup> A useful correlative to the masculine nature of *Forms* can be found in Mary Field Belenky, et. al's *Women Ways of Knowing*. Here, the authors, inspired by Perry's work, interview hundreds of women of different ages and social positions regarding their understandings of self and mind.

texts, alien objects), but also encourages reflection on differences already present in the student's environment (those dorm room conversations, for example). In all cases, such a course moves students to engage that which they previously overlooked, the excess they had "flattened" in order to maintain cognitive equilibrium. Students attempt to account for this excess.

The course I propose involves both reading and writing. Reading must be conceived broadly. It includes, in essence, all acts of perception. How is writing conceived? I will discuss student writing in detail below, but for now we can say that in a Jamesian composition course, writing is conceived, first and foremost, as a *medium of development*. The textual world, in this view, is a space in which to enact more expansive, more creative modes of thought. Student learn to think on the page. And they learn to think in certain ways. The idea is that by becoming accustomed to more expansive, creative acts of meaning making, they develop habits of mind, *tendencies to behavior*, that carry over to other situations. "All of our life, so far as it has definite form," James writes, "is but a mass of habits" (TT 64). The point of a Jamesian writing course is to expose students to liberally educated habits. For a variety of reasons (the nudge of authority, the fact that these habits are fundamentally useful), they will slowly work to reshape the entire mass. This sort of change—change in habit and therefore in people—is what we seek.<sup>10</sup>

The moral thrust of the pedagogy I propose should be apparent. This makes sense, because as previously discussed, William James is quite the moralist. It must be noted, though, how divergent such a view is from current mainstream conceptions of writing instruction. Rather than a medium of development, writing, in rhetoric and composition, we can say, is most often conceived as a medium of communication, or at best, a medium of creation. Note the difference. In the first conception, the individual student—and her intellectual and ethical growth—is the center of pedagogical interest; in the last two, texts and tools are the focus. As argued in chapter one (and again in chapter four), I believe that this focus on text and tools at the expense of "bodily impacts" is a problem. To highlight why, and to illustrate the difference between a Jamesian writing pedagogy and popular modes of writing instruction, I'd like again to turn to Byron Hawk's award-winning *A Counterhistory of Composition*. In particular, I'd like to examine the sections in which he addresses Paul Kameen's (also award-winning) *Writing/Teaching: Essays Towards a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*.

Hawk's ideas about writing instruction are best understood through the lens of "postpedagogy." Closely related to composition's "postprocess" moment (discussed in chapter one), postpedagogy is based on the premise that teaching is inevitably open-ended; outcomes can't be predicted or controlled in any meaningful sense. One upshot of such a view is that writing teachers should stop trying to promote

---

<sup>10</sup> Of course, the alterations will be small, maybe even invisible to the naked eye. By encouraging students to write in certain ways, though, we tilt the world ever so slightly towards certain ideals.

certain (critical/anti-hegemonic) types of student subjectivity. A postpedagogy, Thomas Rickert writes, doesn't ask students to "join the Cause" (2007, 175). Instead of trying to move students to realize the contradictions inherent in capitalism, for example, a post-pedagogy would attempt to promote new, creative ways of thinking and writing about capitalism. Of course, there's risk in such an approach. The "basic postpedagogical move," Paul Lynch writes, is the "co-op(t) method," in which teachers present students with a certain environment and a certain set of resources, and ask them to "co-opt our designs for their own occasions" (2013, 54). The goal is to allow space for surprise, for constellations of thought and story "whose connections we did not and could not anticipate" (2013, 55). Being by nature unpredictable, though, such constellations may take any form (even those opposed to the teacher's values).

In *A Counterhistory*, Hawk assumes a typical postpedagogical stance, positioning himself against the critical pedagogy of James Berlin. As discussed in chapter two, Berlin is aggressively political; working in a postmodern mode, he seeks to move students to "resist hegemonic discourses" (and adopt left-wing political views). To get students to join the cause he has them use certain preset invention heuristics, typically involving the identification and deconstruction of binaries. Hawk argues that such a method doesn't promote either good writing or liberation. In a writing class, the application of a preset strategy "inevitably becomes law" (208). And you can't undo law via law.

As an alternative to preset heuristics, Hawk promotes "linking." Instead of trying to get students to "save the world," he argues, quoting Lawrence Grossberg, we should get them to "invent and link... make connections and map articulations" (216). This requires attention to the specific ecologies in which learning takes place. Writing teachers, Hawk writes, should view classrooms as "ambient interfaces," constellations of bodies, things and texts, which "produce the conditions of possibility for emergence, for invention" (249). It is from the combination of these factors, he believes, rather than any preset plan or critical strategy, that the fruits of writing instruction will arise. He presents Kameen, and the pedagogy on display in *Writing/Teaching*, as an exemplar of an appropriately attuned method.

It should be apparent that I am sympathetic to postpedagogical practice. I agree with Hawk (and Rickert) that quasi-Marxist critical pedagogies like Berlin's are too structuralist; they attempt to impose alien forms on lived experience and will inevitably be resisted and repelled. The pedagogy I propose, as we've seen, emphasizes meaning-making, which is always a situated, embodied practice, drawing on the resources available at a specific place and time. It too promotes "linking over law," and recognizes that the meanings made (in student writing, for example) can be never be predicted or controlled. So, in short, we can say that Hawk's interests and my own are closely aligned. My complaint is that in the service of challenging Berlin's overly deterministic stance, Hawk goes too far in the opposite direction. Writing instruction should not seek to clone little socialists. Yes. Hawk goes beyond this claim though, arguing that the field should abandon the "humanistic hope" that writing instruction can spark any sort of

articulable change in our students (255). He writes, for example, that a commitment to a contextually aware, complex vitalist paradigm means that we must surrender any “pre-set desire for student subjectivity” (255). Is this correct? Context is key, of course, and the future is never certain. It seems to me, though, that writing teachers *need* some conception of the ways of being we are trying to promote. This sort of ideal, while never actually realized, helps guide our practice. Besides, that ideal is always there, always influencing our behavior (even if, as in Hawk’s case, it’s not acknowledged).

While Hawk’s analysis is more sophisticated than most, his move to deny writing instruction any articulable *telos* reflects the dominant trend in materially inflected composition studies. Not surprisingly, given his erasure of individuated bodies, here we see writing understood as a medium of communication and creation, rather than (human) development. Though he denies an undue interest in product, Hawk’s main concern seems to be in allowing for the production of creative, inventive texts. To further this end, he discredits top-down, decontextualized pedagogies like that of Berlin. Fine. My concern is that in focusing on the importance of the now, of the lived moment (from which inventive texts arise) Hawk elides engagement with the actual consequences of writing instruction. This is not a progressive move. Though the framing is different, such positioning is no different, in the main, from reductionist conceptions of writing as a simple “skill.” In both cases, we see a failure to fully consider what writing instruction actually does. In both cases, we see student writing theorized as a medium of communication and creation, but not a material force, capable of bodily impacts.

Can writing instruction change how people think and act? If so, can these changes be identified (in the abstract, at least) and made visible for debate? William James and the tradition of liberal education would say yes. Hawk seems ambivalent. At points he seems to dismiss the possibility of even semi-predictable behavioral change. He qualifies this claim, though. “The subject,” in the world of complex vitalist pedagogy, “becomes a side effect of the pedagogical-machine that cannot be completely determined” (255). But at the same time, a properly structured “pedagogical-machine” can help students “build a new well of knowledge...that will inevitably change the way they see the world” (228). So changes in perception, in individuated being, can occur and are implicitly desirable, but they can’t be definitively charted, and must always come from the “outside in”—as side effects of immersion in certain environment. OK. But what might such changes look like in lived reality? And how and why should I seek them? Because he is primarily interested in rhetorical production—in “invention,” as in the creation of new, unexpected textual objects—Hawk is unable to answer such questions. Writing theorized only as a medium of communication and creation, in other words, proves insufficient.

Hawk’s use of Kameen to promote his posthuman, anti-teleological vision of writing instruction is somewhat ironic. Not that his description of Kameen’s classroom is off the mark. He writes that Kameen “invites academics to see classroom ecologies as open spaces that produce knowledge” (225).



This is correct. In *Writing/Teaching* Kameen shows how he and his students engage in a communal process of meaning making. Kameen shows himself grasping, puzzling, and in general, demonstrating the process of “linking and building a constellation” out of the various resources available in a particular time and place (231). This is, as Hawk suggests, a remarkably *situated* pedagogy. It seems to me, though, that Hawk fails to consider the larger purpose of the activities depicted. “Kameen’s book is genuinely hopeful,” Hawk writes, “not necessarily about what teachers can help students do or even become... but about that moment of emergence in the classroom” (225). Emergence, yes, but so what? What’s the actual *material impact* of this activity? Hawk, unwilling to think in terms of individuals, and individual development (what students can become), is unable to theorize what some call “transfer.” He’s unable to explain how what happens in the classroom—the frisson of bodies and ideas and objects which leads to new ideas—resonates beyond that space.

I say Hawk’s use of Kameen is ironic because Kameen has a rather clear conception of how reading and writing relate to lived experience. Moreover, I’d argue that Kameen values classroom invention precisely because of these extra-curricular effects. In a discussion of Plato’s *Protagoras* contained within *Writing/Teaching*, for example, Kameen notes that while “to *be* good is impossible... to *become* good is not only possible but what we are here for” (127). We become good, he writes, “by the good we do,” as an result of certain types of behavior, certain practices (127). Classroom activities promote these practices and thus promote the good. The “value of teaching and learning in this view,” he writes, “is measured in terms of what changes and how much, not in terms of knowledge-as-commodity” (127). What changes, of course, are individual teachers and students. Through shared engagement with poetry, for example, the frames by which we make sense of the world shift. Our thinking becomes a little more flexible, a little more fluid. Kameen himself notes such changes within himself. As a teenager, he writes, he spent much time thinking about the value of poetry. Why read it? “The answer I came up with,” he writes, “was a simple one: It increased my capacity to experience” (99). In this single line, I’d argue, we find perhaps the ultimate justification for liberal education. We also find the antidote to the hegemony of the fragments. While mindful of Hawk’s warning about preset formulations, a Jamesian writing pedagogy recognizes that such growth—in experience, in being—is possible (if not predictable), and makes its achievement the *telos* of writing instruction.

## 5.6 WILLIAM JAMES IN FYC

*A Counterhistory of Composition* is an important book: award-winning, written by a major figure in our field. Nick Tingle's *Self-Development and College Writing* is less well known. It's received few reviews, and to my knowledge, no awards.<sup>11</sup> I think, though, that *Self-Development* is equally important. Here, Tingle argues that the first-year writing classroom should be reconceived as a "transitional space" in which students are brought into a new relationship with writing, and via writing, the university and the world. His approach is unique among recent comp scholarship in that it is informed by psychology rather than rhetoric or French critical theory. The result is a laudable focus on individual students and their holistic development. All told, Tingle offers a refreshing counterpoint to postpedagogical claims that writing instruction is of no (identifiable) consequence.

Like Perry, Tingle believes that sense-making practices evolve in identifiable patterns, with late adolescence—and thus the first-year writing class—being a key point in the developmental process. He frames the changes which may (or may not) occur at this point in terms of "self-authoring." The self-authored individual, we can say, recognizes the social forces that impact her, but refuses to be defined by those forces. She refuses to see her self as merely "a theatre in which things happen" (17). In turn, she is able to conceive of discourse as a tool, as a human construction, and thus gain some measure of control over thought and language.

Now, though Tingle is certainly a materialist, a doctrinaire *new* materialist would likely accuse him of a regressive fixation on "the subject." In centering his analysis on the sense-making practices of individuated, embodied humans, he draws our attention away from ecologies, networks, fluxes, etc. Yes. I think this is a valuable move, though. In focusing on writing's relationship to *human* development he helps us better understand what we're doing in the classroom and why. Interestingly, he sees the movement towards self-authorship as both closely connected to academic writing and utterly holistic. When we ask a student to write a critical essay, he argues, we ask them to detach word from world in a manner at odds with (conventional) common sense. We ask them to *perform* self-authorship. To do so with authority, Tingle believes, students must ultimately come to change their "beliefs, ideas, ethical principles, thoughts, notions, and basic affective attitudes towards reality" (7). Writing is thus intimately linked to broader developmental change. As he sees it, the main goal of the freshman writing class should be to support students as they transition to self-authorship.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tingle himself, unlike Hawk, is not a tenured professor; he is a lecturer, teaching, by his own account, seven or eight writing classes each year for the past twenty-five.

If Tingle is right, writing well in an academic mode requires seeing, feeling and thinking in new ways. It requires taking on an entirely new mode of being. Can we “teach” new modes of being? This is an open question. Such changes certainly occur though. Indeed, every day, in every community, people enter into new relationships with thought and language, come to know and care for things previously ignored. Much of this sort of learning (if we can call it that) is, of course, tacit. It occurs through a process akin to osmosis, as a result of being immersed in environments in which bodies do certain things in certain ways. William Perry, we can recall, writes that to spur development, students must feel that they are part of a community. From a Jamesian perspective, this is understandable. Education, for James, remember, is the shaping of tendencies to behavior, the cultivation of habit. It’s undisputed that we acquire habits from those around us. This includes both bad habits, like cigarettes or cursing, and more productive ones, like coming to know and care for a wider array of experience.

Tingle argues that to position the writing classroom as a transitional space, teachers must both demonstrate the value of a more expansive mode of being and support students as they struggle to make such a move. If we value tacit learning, we see that much of this demonstration and support must come in the form of doing and thus of modeling. Byron Hawk provides a model in the form of Paul Kameen. Integrally though, Hawk doesn’t ask us to recreate Kameen’s classroom (that’s impossible, as each teacher will inevitably face a different set of contextual resources). Instead, he draws our attention to Kameen’s method. William James also displays a singular method. How might a Jamesian method of engaging the world inform our pedagogical practice?

More than anything else, a Jamesian method, I’d say, is marked by generosity. When others describe William James, either as a man, or as a writer and thinker, a term often used is “resonate.” James is notable for the way in which he *resonates* to the world. This term is used, I believe, because it captures the intense, full-bodied nature of his engagement with objects, others and ideas. James’s desire to *really know* is cognitive, of course, but also deeply affective, and (some suggest) pseudo-sexual. “So great was James’s appreciation of philosophical ideas,” Richard Gale writes, “that it bordered on philosophical satyrism. It seemed that he never met a philosophy to whose charms he did not succumb” (20). Fascinatingly, James seems equally capable of resonating to conflicting, even oppositional, positions. Gale notes, for example, that James often treats his opponents’ ideas more generously—and makes them seem more appealing—than their own defenders. This striking ability to feel multiple sides, to be truly *interested* in diversity of experience, defines the Jamesian method.

What does resonance look like in the classroom? Fortunately, Bird Baldwin, one of his former students, provides a first-hand account. Baldwin writes:

James's lectures and recitations were usually informal and of a conversational nature; he would walk into the room, take his seat, begin talking about the subject and soon all members of the class were eagerly taking part.... His strongest points as a teacher were that he made his students think because he was thinking, and that he treated each topic with such richness, vividness and intensity that it became the most important and interesting topic of the year (372).

In this early version of a teaching evaluation, we see one of Byron Hawk's "pedagogical machines" at work. When Bird Baldwin and his classmates converse with William James, information is transferred, of course. That is only a small fraction of what occurs, though. Through his own resonance James sparks a similar state of interest and engagement in those present. James, as Sarin Marchetti notes, "always aims at making us *do* something" (26). He is, in essence, a catalyst. In the classroom, he makes his students think by engaging in thought. He makes them interested by being interested. This requires a sustained, yet casual intimacy with both his collaborators and the ideas at hand. Like many Jamesian concepts, such intimacy sets the conditions for its own possibility. It both stems from and facilitates a collapse of boundaries: between teacher and student, individual and community, thinker and thought.

Baldwin writes that James, as a teacher, "thrilled the imagination... and led one into unexplored regions" (372). In our fragmented world, the image of the teacher as a sort of expedition leader is particularly instructive. I've previously argued that intellectual and ethical growth requires exposure to difference. We grow when we encounter the alien, and must bend and flex to make room for it within our reality. For an encounter to be transformative, though, we must be willing to engage the alien on terms we can't fully control. This sort of openness can be uncomfortable, frightening even. In the figure of James as a confident, casual explorer of the excess, we see one way that teachers might be able to help students overcome fear of disruption.

Placing the above insights beside William Perry and Nick Tingle, we can imagine the writing classroom as a space in which teachers and students, working together, confront and try to make sense of that which they don't understand. The teacher acts as a sort of tour guide or expedition leader. She may not resonant like William James, but she can still *perform* active engagement. She can make a show of being interested, of turning towards rather than away from the unknown and even the distasteful. Via this lack of fear, she demonstrates the value of the developmental move she is inviting students to make. Through her example, students come to feel, on an intuitive level, that the excess—though it may appear as a danger—is actually an opportunity. Like James, they begin to welcome disruption, because they realize that disruption is essential to more inclusive, more expansive, and more productive, modes of

understanding. In short, they realize that it is in their own best interests to look beyond their fragment. The writing classroom thus becomes a truly transitional space.

\*\*\*

I'm obviously not William James. That said, I've had some success implementing the kind of pedagogy described above. Advice? Drawing on the work of Nick Tingle again, I'd suggest that one of the best ways to start coming terms with difference is to encourage students to recognize and analyze their affective states. Tingle finds that students aren't often aware of how singular, how subjective, their responses to a particular poem or essay or image might be. I think there's truth in this; in a fragmented age it's easy to consign the other, the alien, to a dark corner, and to convince yourself that your own perspective is the norm. A focus on the affective helps break this habit.

To make plurality real—and to allow the singular nature of perception to emerge as an object of inquiry—I like to do a simple exercise. I present my class with a provocative stimulus and ask them to write about it. “How does this make you feel?” I ask. “What does it make you think about?” The stimulus can be anything—Mary Ellen Mark's famous photo of a young girl smoking a cigarette, for example. After a few minutes of free-writing, I ask another question: “Why? Why do you think you feel this way?” We write for a few more minutes, then we share what we've written. I say “we,” because I too am free-writing, I too am trying to understand. This image of the teacher scratching in his notebook, puzzling, is essential to the whole process, I believe. As is the idea that no one response or interpretation is more right or true than another. The goal is simply to: 1) note what we think and feel; and 2) consider how this came to be.

The conversations this simple activity sparks are fascinating and often quite revealing. They bring forth assumptions about morality, knowledge and perception which I find can't be addressed without some concrete point of reference. “That must be in the south,” one girl said of the Mary Ellen Mark photo. A classmate from Alabama was shocked. He thought that the photo was from Hollywood, of a young Drew Barrymore perhaps. In this one exchange, we see a striking disparity in understanding: not just regarding the photo, but in assumptions about the world. The process of communal introspection and inquiry makes these assumptions visible. The next step—the one we engage with throughout the course—is what to make of such difference?

## 5.7 WRITING THE FRAGMENTS (IN THEORY)

In the above section I outlined some ways in which William James might inform pedagogical practice. Following the tradition of liberal education, I argued that the writing classroom be conceived as a space in which to model productive engagement with difference. Of course, in composition studies, how we understand—and therefore teach—reading and writing is also important. How does Jamesian thought inform these activities? As we’ve seen, reading should be conceived broadly. Students might “read” architecture, an apple, a Kinks song, or an internet meme, in addition to traditional academic texts. In each case, the goal is to discover something new. We can do this by thinking about the object, the frames by which we give meaning to the object, and most importantly, how and why these frames may vary among individuals, between communities, or across time. Such analysis involves attending to both cognitive and affective responses. It involves putting an object in deep context, tracing its causes and consequences and the various meanings it can spawn.

How is writing conceived in a Jamesian classroom? Given the current state of composition theory, this is a complex question.<sup>12</sup> As a starting point, I’ve argued that we should conceive student writing as a medium of development. Rather than focusing on technical qualities or even rhetorical impact we should give pride of place to the behavioral tendencies displayed in a text. Does a student recognize complexity and plurality? Do they make an attempt to engage the excess rather than dismissing it in the name of clarity or rhetorical expediency? In practice, writing of this sort often involves the interrogation of language. How do certain ways of speaking relate to certain ways of seeing? What interests and investments are at stake? Such analysis is, of course, relentlessly self-reflective. To recognize plurality is to recognize that your way of writing is just that—your way of writing. Rather than being natural or given, writing, like thinking, is always an active construction, with both causes and consequences. Strong student writers, from a Jamesian perspective, recognize this. They take ownership of language and per this new-found authority, use writing as a tool to make sense of the world.

As discussed in chapter one, the ultimate goal of a Jamesian writing pedagogy is to increase students’ meaning-making ability. Meaning-making, as I understand it, is to see one thing as a sign for another. One’s meaning-making ability grows when she is able to incorporate more of the miasma which

---

<sup>12</sup> I recognize that “writing” is a contested term, with many in our field arguing that students need to learn to compose in a variety of media: sound, image, assemblage, computer code (see Shipka, Selfe, Ceraso, Vee). Personally, I think that multi-modal composition pedagogies show great promise; I don’t mean to suggest that complex, self-aware meaning making can only occur via alphabetic text. That said, the liberal arts tradition, as embodied by James and Perry, privileges text (perhaps due to the intimate connection between language and thought as discussed in chapter two). As such, the following presumes a form of writing which is primarily textual.

surrounds every object and idea: when she is able to make room in her conceptual framework for that which was previously unacknowledged. On the page, meaning often takes the form of connection between disparate bits of experience.<sup>13</sup> As a simple example, consider my cat, Boots (currently asleep at my feet). “Animal” is one potential meaning of the sensory stimulus she presents. “Catches mice” is another. Starting from this baseline understanding, a student creates a more expansive meaning when she is able to associate Boots, in addition to these two meanings, with “worshipped by ancient Egyptians” or “feared by my classmate, Becky.” By being able to find a place for these additional connections—to recognize and incorporate a bit of the excess—a student’s thinking grows a little more complex and her world a little richer. This sort of movement is ultimately what we should seek in student writing. By encouraging more expansive, more generous acts of meaning-making on the page, the thinking goes, we encourage the same in the world at large.

Of course, there’s no dogma when thinking with William James. Therefore, the exact form student writing takes will inevitably vary based on teacher, student, and other contextual factors. To me though, it seems that the excess most often reveals itself in the details. As I teach it, therefore, a Jamesian writing pedagogy emphasizes the concrete, the use of exacting description and definition. What *exactly* did you see? What *exactly* did you feel? What does that word or phrase *really* mean? Similarly, based on the premise that discourse often hides more than it reveals, I encourage students to come down from the conceptual clouds, to use real-life examples, to think about the real-life consequences of words and ideas. Content-wise, much of my students’ writing is admittedly “personal,” in that it takes lived experience as its subject matter. Students also incorporate outside texts and ideas into their writing though, using them as provocations (Gerald Graff’s “they say” arguments) as well as lenses through which to filter their own experience (Bartholomae and Petrosky’s “ways of reading”).

So a Jamesian writing pedagogy is eclectic. As it must be. I suspect, though, that certain forms of writing simply wouldn’t work with the goals I propose. Any mode which fetishizes structure or technical correctness, for example. To be able to make the most generous meanings possible, it seems to me, students need to use writing as a means of exploration. The fetishization of form limits this ability. Essays in the traditional argumentative mode may do the same. It’s not that one shouldn’t make forceful arguments (otherwise, James and I would be great hypocrites!). The problem is that in doing so there’s too much of an incentive to ignore that which complicates your case, that which is confusing or doesn’t quite fit. These elements are, of course, the excess; they are exactly what students must engage.

---

<sup>13</sup> This may occur through metaphor, the application of a frame or concept to an example, or by placing objects in context (tracing their causes and consequences). As discussed in chapter two, abstraction—the identification and grouping of qualities—typically underlies the meaning-making process.

\*\*\*

To demonstrate how the above ideas might shape pedagogy—and to better position myself within the field—it’s useful to turn to an example. In chapter one, I noted that only two rhet-comp texts have dealt with William James in any substantial manner. One of these texts is *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, by Thomas Newkirk. Here, Newkirk uses James to argue for the pragmatic value of personal writing. Towards this end, he presents and comments upon a student essay originally found in David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course*. I’d like to present a reading of the same essay.

To set the scene, I’ll note that the point of contention is commonplaces. Bartholomae and Petrosky, in describing a basic writing course focused on introducing students to academic discourse, argue that a key component of such a course must be learning to “problematize” our standard narratives, our commonplaces. Newkirk, drawing on James, argues that this sort of pedagogy doesn’t sufficiently respect the use value of the commonplace.

The essay at issue arises from an assignment early in Bartholomae and Petrosky’s course. It is offered as an example of the sort of problems basic writers face in the university. The prompt is simple, asking students to describe a significant life experience and explain its significance. In response, a certain student writes:

When I went to South Catholic I became friends with my spanish teacher, his name was Brother Larwarance Dempsey. He was a great teacher and was also assistant Coach to the wrestling team. One day he invited me down to the weight-training room, he showed me a few of the machines and how to use them. Since he was just starting to lift weights I wanted to start to. That October he wanted me to go out for the wrestling team. I was scared to death a little puggy kid like me....

The writer goes on to describe how “brother Larry” helped him get interested in lifting weights, resulting in a position on the varsity wrestling team. A crisis occurs when brother Larry leaves the school, but the writer is able to overcome this setback. In a one-sentence final paragraph, he explains the significance of the experience thusly: “*If you work hard and follow the rules things will get better and better*” (32).

In these lines, Bartholomae and Petrosky see the failure of a writer to think and write in an academic mode. The description of his experience, they argue, remains trapped within a premade “*Boys Life* narrative of struggle and success,” and the subsequent “reading” of that experience seems oddly detached from the description (33). The authors believe that the problem lies in the writer’s failure “to see his relationship to a way of talking, a discourse” (33). He’s unable to realize that the story he tells about his relationship with brother Larry is only a story, one interpretation among many possible interpretations; he takes the *Boys Life* narrative as “what is.” Deprived of the “critical authority” that



comes from the recognition of his own interpretative power, he resorts to secondhand moralism to establish his right to speak, hence the aphoristic and decidedly non-academic nature of his analysis.

Newkirk takes issue with this interpretation. He suggests that Bartholomae and Petrosky unfairly dismiss the student's life experience. The student is "testifying to beliefs that have meant something in [his life]" and that act in itself, Newkirk seems to believe, is worthy of praise (91). Furthermore, the underlying mode of thought—by helping the student make the varsity team—has paid off. Why should the student think differently? If he can survive and thrive with borrowed thought and story, why should he seek more complex conceptualizations?

I respect Newkirk's query, but in light of the preceding pages, my rejoinder is obvious: *because material reality demands it*. Jamesian thought, remember, is rooted in the belief that the world is a place of multiplicity and change. To not grow, attune, adapt, is to die. Now, neither myself, nor James, nor Bartholomae and Petrosky, would deny that the student's belief in the value of hard work has served him well in the past. Bartholomae and Petrosky's simple claim is that the mode of thought by which he arrived at that belief is not well-suited for success in the university. My contribution, via James, is to show that the changes they (and I) seek are intimately related to who and what we are as embodied beings. Of course, it might still be useful, at times, for a writer to conceptualize his world in simple, commonplace terms. Liberal education, though, ensures that these terms are not his only option.

As the above indicates, I see Bartholomae and Petrosky as working in the tradition of liberal education as I've defined it. When they speak of the ability to "see discourse as discourse" there are clear echoes of William Perry and the epistemological changes he seeks to induce, along with Nick Tingle and his interest in "self-authorship." Along with William James, all these thinkers ask that we learn to distance ourselves from our thought and language, to see reality as something other than story (and hence story as malleable). In chapter two I drew attention to Bartholomae's pragmatist bent. Once again here, in his belief that language must be worked on and against, we see that influence on display.

Though I suspect Newkirk is a good teacher, we clearly read James differently. Yes, in the "Will To Believe," James does famously hold that faith in a fact can sometimes help create that fact. We must keep in mind, though, that in addition to being a generous thinker, James was also a remarkably rigorous one; the will to believe, he is very clear, may only be invoked in certain exceptional circumstances. Otherwise, as Bartholomae and Petrosky suggest, we must push against our thought and story, constantly on the lookout for the unexplained or incongruent. "What mankind at large most lacks is criticism and caution," James writes, "especially when the conception has instinctive liking at its back" (qtd. in Barzun 240). The project of liberal education, at its core, entails imparting a measure of the critical and cautious. On the whole, this entails challenging commonplaces, not embracing them.

As is apparent, my project shares many of the same assumptions as that of Bartholomae and Petrosky. I too see the primary goal of the writing class as the cultivation of meaning-making ability, and the text (or any object, I'd add) as an opportunity to make meaning. To learn to write better, we agree, is to learn to make more expansive and richer meanings. Likewise, our courses are structured in a similar manner; in both cases students study a single topic using "the basic methods of university inquiry" (30). From this position of first-hand knowledge, they begin to work outward and to abstract upward.

So, how does my response to the brother Larry essay differ? I've argued that we should view student writing as a medium of development. Instead of fetishizing the text, we should seek to identify and work upon the behavioral tendencies displayed. Here, the tendency is to force the fulsomeness of lived experience into a restrictive conceptual frame. How can we encourage more generous thought? Among other moves, Bartholomae and Petrosky would have the brother Larry writer imagine his experience through different "interpretive frames" (34). They would have him consider how Audre Lorde or Walker Percy might think and write about those events in the high school weight room. Putting such a pedagogy in terms of my project, we can say that they believe that looking and writing via Lorde or Percy allows the student to glimpse some of the excess, some of the miasma which surrounds his experience. This can disrupt his original frame, thus allowing for new thought and story.

In general, I support the above method. I agree that the use of texts as "lens" can be productive. My Jamesian pedagogy moves beyond this, though, by suggesting that an equally productive way of disrupting the commonplace is to move the student to connect his experience of brother Larry to other disparate bits of experience. This involves acknowledging other realities, thus creating a web of meaning (via the text) that is able to reconcile what seems irreconcilable. Like Bartholomae and Petrosky, I would not tell the student that "if you work hard you will succeed" isn't true. Instead, I would move him to acknowledge that other, even contradictory claims are also true. For example, I would draw his attention to police shootings, wherein young black men—some "hard working" and "rule-abiding," no doubt—were gunned down. Or stories of the working poor. Or times in which he himself worked hard only to fall short.<sup>14</sup> Again, the point is not to "change his mind" about his previous claim; it is simply to bring him to the realization of multiplicity, of complexity, and to make him account for this fact. The world is both X and Y, I ask, how can this be? To answer this question, the student must draft a new, more complex meaning. Overtime, this sort of additive thinking becomes habitual. By being moved to wrestle with the very real fact of plurality, of irreconcilable difference, his meaning-making ability grows. His relation to language and thought changes, and his world expands.

---

<sup>14</sup> I use "I" here merely for dramatic effect. Per my pedagogy, the student would in fact discover these conflicting positions on his own, through research. His teacher simply urges him to keep looking.

## 5.8 WRITING THE FRAGMENTS (IN PRACTICE)

It's only fitting that a chapter on the teaching of writing should end with a discussion of student work. In the preceding pages, I've argued, at least implicitly, that what I've termed a Jamesian writing pedagogy is capable of furthering abstract ethical and political ends (combating the hegemony of the fragments, thus safeguarding democracy, basically), along with satisfying writing instruction's more practical remit (helping students become better writers). In my discussion of Bartholomae and Petrosky's brother Larry essay, I've shown how my ideas build upon that which has come before. The writing of my own students can further illustrate how a Jamesian writing pedagogy might play out on the page.

I teach freshman writing at a large public university (the same university that the brother Larry writer once attended). In the fall of 2017, I designed and taught a course based on Jamesian principles, the goal being to help students both improve their writing and better cope with our fragmented world. Towards this end, they engaged otherness both on and off the page. In chapter three, I discussed an embodied activity in which my students were asked to "become an animal" and thus (hopefully) experience some of the excess which their standard modes of perception had been concealing. Earlier in this chapter, I showed how we engage the excess as a group, in the classroom. Now, we move to the second, and primary, part of what I previously described as a "double-barreled" course: essay writing.

As noted in chapter three, in my class, each student writes a total of four essays. All the essays are on a single topic of the student's choosing. My only requirement is that the topic involve an "ethical conflict," described simply as a situation in which there's no easy answer. In the class under discussion, students wrote about cultural appropriation, whether to medicate hyperactive children, and if and when suicide might be justified. Two things are worth noting about my essay requirements. First, I think allowing students to pick their own object of inquiry is essential to my larger goals. I want students writing and thinking at the very limits of their ability; this sort of engagement can only occur, it seems, if they're genuinely interested in a topic. Second, I think it's equally important that students stick with the same topic throughout the course of the semester. When a writer is writing from a shallow pool of knowledge, they are more likely to rely on easy commonplaces; it is only when they devote some time, attention and mental energy to a topic that nuanced, original thought becomes possible. Or put differently, the more we look and listen, the more likely we are to notice the excess, the details that disrupt the story we usually tell. Writing, speaking and thinking about the same topic for fifteen weeks facilitates this sort of movement.

As also noted in chapter three, my essay prompts are sequenced to gradually promote more complex forms of meaning making. They move from personal reflection, to the application of course readings, to the application of outside research, to a combination of all these elements. I structure the course this way to encourage students to ground abstract inquiry in lived experience. I also want them thinking about the ways in which experience shapes understanding. The same logic explains why in my class academic writing assignments run parallel with embodied activities and classroom encounters with otherness. Simply put, as they write and research, I want my students constantly thinking about the troublesome interface between selves and world.

In a very real sense, the class I propose builds up to the final essay, which is inevitably written and revised multiple times. The larger goal—though I may not phrase it in these terms—is for students to use all that we’ve read, done and discussed to try to come to terms with a little bit more of the world’s complexity. Their ethical conflict provides a concrete point of reference. Integrally, though, they’re not expected to solve the conflict (if it’s a true ethical conflict, that’s impossible). Instead, I simply want to see that they can write and think it with more depth and nuance. This entails being able to recognize and synthesis more perspectives, more data points. It entails capturing some of the excess.

Let’s look at some student work. I will center my discussion around Jenny, a first-year nursing student. Jenny was tall, blond, athletic and one of the most outgoing students in my class. As we’ll see, over the course of the semester her writing got significantly more sophisticated. Some of her early writing didn’t turn out so well, though. In that regard, her work represents a unique opportunity to display both what we want, and don’t want, when we think about student writing from a Jamesian perspective.

Early in the course, as part of my efforts to make real the always-embodied nature of perception, I had Jenny and her classmates visit a local museum and document their encounter with a piece of artwork. My prompt asked that they consider both the artwork and their response to it, to track what it made them think and feel. In short, I wanted them to practice noticing.

Now, this is a slightly unusual assignment. It demands a degree of exposure. Perhaps used to less personal forms of writing, Jenny was caught off-guard. She recognized that she was to track her response to the artwork and try to get at the why behind that response. But the language and ideas she uses to capture this “why” seem oddly borrowed: unoriginal and facile. Similarly, though she begins with the specific—“*The room was silent, but my thoughts were deafening. As I stared up at the sea foam green sculpture, my shoulders grew heavy...*”—the essay could be written in response to just about any prompt. Something happened when she stood in front of that sea foam green sculpture, but apart from one brief mention of “feeling troubled,” Jenny doesn’t engage her actual experience. Instead, she retreats to a series of clichéd reflections on the meaning of America. “*Established upon values of liberty,*” she

writes, “America has... given me the freedom to think as I please, the freedom to see as I see, the freedom to simply be myself.” This freedom, she goes on to argue, has made her fundamentally optimistic, and determined to work hard to achieve her goals. Growing up in America, she concludes, has given her “the important qualities of determination, motivation, and persistence,” thus “provide[ing] me the means by which I can respond to failures, learning and growing from them, and ultimately allow myself to view all things through the lens of an optimist.” This optimistic lens, it is suggested, shaped how she experienced the sculpture.

Here, as with the brother Larry essay thirty years before, we see the type of student writing a Jamesian pedagogy must resist. Rather than using writing as a mode of inquiry, Jenny uses it to avoid thinking, either about her specific experience or about the discourses she’s been taught. As noted, she fails to delve into the details of her interaction with the sculpture—what she saw, felt and thought—and how and why (or why not) these details might be singular. Instead, she retreats to the safety of pre-approved abstraction. She also fails to consider why she might be moved to turn to certain discourses in certain situations. Why does it feel so natural, for example, in an essay for English class, to speak of overcoming adversity? Simply put, in the above lines we see a student refusing to step outside what she already knows, refusing to engage the excess. The result is a technically sound, but vacuous piece of writing.

Now, I like Jenny. I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt. She’s busy, has only limited intellectual energy, and to fulfil this alien assignment turned to the first narrative which came to mind: a college admissions essay. This is OK. It’s early in the semester. In my comments, I sought to draw her attention to the ways in which language can hide as much as it can reveal. I did this by trying to get her to focus on her actual experience with the sculpture. What did she think and feel in the moment? Why? This is based on the (Jamesian) assumption that at that specific moment in the museum she had thoughts and feelings which aren’t exhausted by the dominant clichés. To get her experience to fit into a pre-made, socially (and intuitionally) approved mold, she had to ignore a lot of important information. I wanted to draw her attention to that which was left over.

Let’s skip forward a bit. Being interested in medicine, Jenny choose stem-cell research as her ethical conflict. She wrote of her experience with this issue (her grandfather had died of Parkinson’s disease—potentially curable via work with stem cells) and did various forms of research (collecting and analyzing a range of opinions, for example). Jenny had strong “pro-research” sympathies. Like many students, I had to urge her to abandon the argumentative mode of essay writing and instead focus on simply trying to understand. Why and how do people disagree about this topic, I asked repeatedly?

Early on, as with many of my students, Jenny displayed a tendency to frame the conflict in stark terms. Work with a particular line of stem cells, she wrote in her second essay, can “*find the cure to my grandfather’s illness,*” but will also “*inflict severe anguish to the family—the potential mother and father—of the embryo that was deprived of a fair shot at life.*” Here, I’d argue, we see a common symptom of the hegemony of the fragments. Simply put, Jenny is unable to articulate why someone might oppose her position. She papers over her ignorance with the implicit claim that sometimes embryos are “stolen” from would-be parents; this is why some people are anti-research, she argues. “Think about what you’re saying here,” I wrote in my comments, “stem cells used in research don’t come from babies people want, yes? What’s the real point of contention?”

Over time, through engagement with and response to difference (in the form of my presence, course readings, our various in-class activities, and her own research), Jenny began to think about her conflict in more complex terms. She began to understand, and integrate, more perspectives. In turn, her writing became more sophisticated. Now, instead of simply parroting that which she had heard elsewhere, she was able to make original insights. I think her final essay, while in no way perfect, demonstrates a clear increase in meaning-making ability. Jenny writes:

The passage of time is inevitable. No matter what you do, the clock keeps ticking, and the world keeps moving. With it, come constant changes, innovations, and growth. Sometimes we get ahead of ourselves in the midst of all this rapid change, and approach a blank page with a pen that has run out of ink.

What next?

If you ask German Philosopher Martin Heidegger, he’d tell you us humans are “encircled more tightly by the forces of technology...[which have] outgrown [our] capacity for decision.” All of the headway we have made with technology has now brought us to a dead end where there is just no “right” answer- no ink to fill the blank page.

Among one of these dead ends is the topic of stem cell research, which gives rise to many ethical issues. Stem cells come from embryos, and in order to retrieve them, the early embryo must be destroyed. The embryos that are used would otherwise be discarded, however people still see this as a life that was deprived of a fair shot. Embryonic stem cell research, however, has shown promising results for the potential discovery of new

medical treatments. This ethical conflict forces us to prioritize human lives- that of an embryo, or that of someone with an illness. How do we decide which one to favor?

Answers given to this question simply represent opinions. These standpoints will be influenced by a wide array of areas, including religious beliefs, culture, and personal experiences. Interestingly enough, though, just because two people have synonymous backgrounds does not mean their opinions on this topic, or any controversial topic for that matter, will necessarily coincide.

For example, my roommate and I were both raised devout Christians. Our upbringings are nearly exact, and we have many of the same values. One would most likely guess that our stance on this issue would be the same, however that is clearly not the case. When speaking to Alyssa about this topic, she stated "You are taking a life. How can you place more value on the life of someone who is older? That is like saying someone who is 21 is 3 times as important as someone who is 7. It just does not work like that."

I think two factors that cause the difference in our opinions on this topic are our career interests and personal connection to the issue. My roommate is a business major and takes no particular interest in anything healthcare related. She also has a very superficial connection to this topic, because although she lost a grandparent to cancer, she was too young to remember. The lack of attachment to her grandparent is most likely a supporting reason for her take on the topic. As a current nursing student, I take a specific interest in healthcare and research because I see how important it is to the medical field. I also am currently watching my grandfather suffer from Parkinson's disease, which stem cell research had shown promising results for curing.

In my first essay, I speak much about the importance of failures in shaping your mindset. Not solely failures necessarily, but more specifically how we respond to failures. When we respond with determination and keep trying, that defines an optimistic mindset- one that believes that success is possible. On the other hand, a more pessimistic view would neglect continual efforts because they do not have hope for a success. These two mindsets are exemplified by myself and my neighbor, and have something to do with upbringing.

Growing up, my parents constantly stressed the importance of never quitting. I was taught to work hard for what I wanted, especially in school. Although my parents never required me to, I always had job as a teenager to have my own money. There was a stress on academics in my household, and we were taught that school should be our top priority. While the same academic importance was stressed to my neighbor, she was handed everything by her parents. If she wanted a new phone, her parents would buy it for her. Anything she wanted, she got. This type of upbringing, I feel, shortchanged her because now she lacks important qualities to reach her fullest potential. She lacks resilience. In college now, her parents are no longer there to fight her battles and she never learned how to do so herself, so she gives up. When I spoke to her about stem cell research, I found her response particularly interesting, "I feel that if something were to come of it, it would have happened already. Funding for stem cell research should be decreased, and instead put towards new research ideas." This reflects her tendency to give up and jump to something new if she does not see immediate results, which is a result of her lack of resilience. Instead of giving something another shot, or trying to think deeper about ways that stem cell research could be used, she immediately jumps to starting a new project. She loses hope for this option, and therefore negates it. I differ from her completely on this topic. I feel that since such promising results have already been shown by this method of research, it should be used more. Who is to say increasing funds couldn't help with a breakthrough in this research?

...

[Former president Obama] makes a good point when he states, "Rather than furthering discovery, our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values." I feel that many religions have also done this as they shut out the idea of stem cell research. I can relate to Obama's stance when he states, "As a person of faith, I believe we are called to care for each other and work to ease human suffering. I believe we have been given the capacity and will to pursue this research and the humanity and conscience to do so responsibly." Most religions take a stance on the contrary to stem cell research because they see more negatives than positives with it. Rather than focusing on the negatives associated with stem cell research, Obama and I are focusing on the potential that stem cell research has. That is the type of mindset that will lead to something great .



So maybe it is that period of time dedicated to modification and retrying that gives the pen enough time reload its ink. Maybe that is how we finally are able to fill the last page from corner to corner and everywhere in between. Either way, you can't just crumble up the page and throw it out in frustration. What does that leave you to do? Grab a new page? What would that solve? The pen isn't going to magically work the second it touches a brand new sheet of paper.

There's a lot to like about this essay: the artful opening and closing metaphor; the confident tone; the relatively sophisticated framing of the conflict; the skillful use of quotation. Perhaps most of all, though, I like this essay because here I see a student actively seeking out and trying to understand difference. She interrogates, to the best of her abilities, how she thinks and why, and how others think and why. This entails both empirical inquiry (interviews with her roommate and neighbor, for example) and a certain generosity. She listens to other voices, for example, and is willing to include them in her text, though they inevitably complicates her position.

Interestingly, the writer doesn't abandon the main idea from her earlier writing assignment (about optimism, remember). Instead, she re-thinks it, and in doing so, I'd argue, takes ownership of it. With this movement, I'm reminded of the final stage of William Perry's developmental scheme, what he terms "committed relativism." From this position the student is able to choose among a variety of options and justify her choice. Though I wouldn't want to assign a student (or even a paper) to a specific "stage," I think this is basically what Jenny has done here. Her opinion has remained the same, but now it takes into account a much broader field.

The key section in this essay, I think, is the long paragraph in which she ties together optimism, her neighbor and stem cell research. Here she's using one bit of experience to inform another. In short, she's making connections. This is what a Jamesian writing pedagogy is designed to encourage. Linking, seeing one (seemingly different) thing in another, as I've argued, is thinking in its most fundamental form. It's the engine of meaning, and here, Jenny finds fuel for this engine in various corners of her lifeworld.

In particular, I see this writer starting with a certain narrative—we can call it "optimism." She also has a web of thoughts and feelings about her neighbor. She uses the former to interpret the latter. Then she uses this personal experience to inform the stem cell research debate. She concludes that our thoughts about what humans can accomplish (optimism v. pessimism) determine where we stand on the issue. The point here is not that this conclusion is somehow right. What's important is that she takes an object of study (the stem cell research debate), and by connecting it with other pieces of experience, began to see it (and think it and write about it) in a more nuanced, complex and creative way.

It should be clear that the alphabetic essay, as a technology, is key to the sort of movement this pedagogy hopes to accomplish. And make no mistake, the prompt for the final essay is designed to encourage a specific type of written product: one which approaches its query from many different angles, seeks the “why” behind the “what,” and ties together seemingly disparate bits of experience (the trip to the museum, personal interviews, the ethical conflict, etc.). The goal here is to make the student perform (via the essay) the type of thinking I value and wish to cultivate. As noted, my hope is that by creating a more expansive meaning for one specific object, in one specific space, my students general meaning-making ability will increase. They will begin to approach difference a little more productively. This, in turn, strikes a blow against the hegemony of the fragments

\*\*\*

To conclude, a Jamesian writing pedagogy is a liberal pedagogy in the most expansive sense of the term. Following the American tradition of liberal education, it places students into a controlled encounter with difference, and provides them with the resources and opportunity to make sense of what they experience. Based on materialist principles, it focuses on both individuated, embodied perception, and textual meaning-making. The ultimate goal is to help students think more generously, more creatively, and ultimately, live better. In the above pages I’ve tried to show that such a pedagogy is both feasible and at this point in history, desperately needed. What comes next is up to the reader.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Jonathan, and Jacqueline Rhodes. "Flattening Effects: Composition's Multicultural Imperative and the Problem of Narrative Coherence." *College Composition & Communication* 65.3 (2014).
- Arendt, Hannah. "Thinking and moral considerations: A lecture." *Social Research* (1971): 417-446.
- Baldwin, Bird T. "William James' contributions to education." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2.7 (1911): 369-382.
- Bartholomae, David. "What is Composition and (if you know what that is) Why Do We Teach It?." *Writing on the Margins*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005. 327-342.
- "Teacher Teacher: Poirier and Coles on Writing." *Raritan* 36.3 (2017): 25.
- Bartholomae, David, and Anthony R. Petrosky. *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfactuals: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1986.
- Barzun, Jacques. *A Stroll With William James*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Belenky, Mary Field, et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic books, 1986.
- Bennett, Lance & Manheim, Jarol. "The One-Step Flow of Communication," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* 608 (Nov. 2006).
- Berlin, James. *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. SIU Press, 1987.
- "Rhetoric and ideology in the writing class." *College English* 50.5 (1988): 477-494.
- *Rhetorics, Poetics, And Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. Parlor Press LLC, 2003.
- Berthoff, Ann. *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims For Writing Teachers*. Boynton/Cook, 1981.

- Bizzell, Patricia. *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.
- Bordogna, Francesca. "Inner division and uncertain contours: William James and the politics of the modern self." *The British Journal for the History of Science* 40.4 (2007): 505-536.
- Boyle, Casey. "Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice," *College English*, 78:6, 2016.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Ethics in a World of Consumers*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 2008.
- Burnham, Christopher C. "The Perry scheme and the teaching of writing." *Rhetoric Review* 4.2 (1986): 152-158.
- Coles Jr, William E. *The Plural I—and After*. Boynton/Cook, 1988.
- Comello, Maria Leonora G. "William James on “possible selves”: Implications for studying identity in communication contexts." *Communication Theory* 19.3 (2009): 337-350.
- Connolly, William E. "The ‘new materialism’ and the fragility of things." *Millennium* 41.3 (2013).
- Cooper, Marilyn. "The Ecology of Writing." *College English* 48.4 (1986): 364-375.
- Crispin, Jessa. "Talking to the Dead: Channeling William James in Berlin," theawl.com, accessed Dec. 2017.
- Cronon, William. "'Only Connect...' The Goals of a Liberal Education." *The American Scholar* 67.4 (1998): 73-80.
- Crowley, Sharon. *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*. U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.
- Daniell, Beth. "Theory, Theory Talk, and Composition." *Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. Ed. John Clifford and John Schlib. New York: MLA (1994): 127-140.
- Danisch, Robert. *Pragmatism, Democracy and the Necessity of Rhetoric*. U. of South Carolina Press, 2007.
- Davis, Diane. *Breaking Up (At) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. SIU Press, 2000.
- Dias, Patricia. "From ‘infoxication’ to ‘infosaturation’: a theoretical overview of the cognitive and social effects of digital immersion." *Ámbitos* 24 (2014).
- Dobrin, Sidney. *Postcomposition*. SIU Press, 2011.
- Duffy, John. "Ethical Dispositions: A Discourse for Rhetoric and Composition," *JAC* 34.1-2 (2014).
- "The good writer: Virtue ethics and the teaching of writing." *College English* 79.3 (2017).
- Eriksen, Thomas. *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*, Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001.

- Faigley, Lester. *Fragments Of Rationality: Postmodernity and The Subject of Composition*, U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1991.
- Ferguson, Kennan. *Politics in the Pluriverse*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Fontaine, Sheryl & Hunter, Susan. "Ethical Awareness: A Process of Inquiry." *Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition and English Studies*, Ed. S. Fontaine and S. Hunter. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998.
- Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Council of Writing Program Administrators, [wpacouncil.org/framework](http://wpacouncil.org/framework), accessed Dec. 2017.
- Gale, Fredric G., Phillip Sipiora, and James L. Kinneavy. *Ethical Issues in College Writing*, 1999.
- Gale, Richard. *The Divided Self of William James*. Cambridge U. Press, 1999.
- Gavin, William. "William James and the Indeterminacy of Language and the 'The Really Real.'" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 50 (1976): 208-218.
- Gozalvez, Vicent. "Education for Democratic Citizenship in a Digital Culture," *Communicar*, 36:18 (2011).
- Grobman, Laurie. "'Just Multiculturalism': Teaching Writing As Critical And Ethical Practice," *JAC* 22.4 (2002).
- "Postpositivist Realism In The Multicultural Writing Classroom: Beyond the Paralysis of Cultural Relativism." *Pedagogy* 3.2 (2003): 205-225.
- Harris, Joseph. "The Rhetoric of Theory." *Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. Ed. John Clifford and John Schlib. New York: MLA (1994): 141-160.
- *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. Utah State UP, 2012.
- Hawk, Byron. *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. U. of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.
- Hays, Janice N. "Models of Intellectual Development and Writing: A Response to Myra Kogen et al." *Journal of Basic Writing* 6.1 (1987): 11-27.
- Heard, Matthew. "Tonality and Ethos." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 46.1 (2013): 44-64.
- Ivie, Stanley. "The Legacy of William James," *Journal of Thought*, Winter 2016.
- James, William. *On Some of Life's Ideals*, Henry Holt and Co, 1899.
- *Psychology: Briefer Course*, Henry Holt and Co., 1900.
- *Talks to Teachers About Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, Henry Holt and Co, 1900.

- *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 1907. Electronic.
  - *Some Problems of Philosophy: Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, Longmans, Green & Co, 1911.
  - *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Longmans, Green & Co, 1912.
  - *Memories and Studies*, Longmans, Green & Co, 1912. Electronic.
  - *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, Green & Co, 1919.
  - *The Principles of Psychology Vol 1*, Henry Holt and Co., 1931.
  - *A Pluralistic Universe*, Rockville, MD: ARC Manor, 2008.
- Johnson, Kristine. "Beyond standards: Disciplinary and national perspectives on habits of mind." *College Composition and Communication* (2013): 517-541.
- Kameen, Paul. *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*. U. of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.
- Kent, Thomas. "On the Very Idea of a Discourse Community." *College Composition and Communication*, 42.4 (1991): 425-445.
- Kerschbaum, Stephanie L. "Avoiding the difference fixation: Identity categories, markers of difference, and the teaching of writing." *College Composition and Communication* (2012): 616-644.
- Kill, Melanie. "Acknowledging the rough edges of resistance: Negotiation of identities for first-year composition." *College Composition and Communication* (2006): 213-235.
- King, Patricia M., and Karen Strohm Kitchener. "Reflective judgment: Theory and research on the development of epistemic assumptions through adulthood." *Educational Psychologist* 39.1 (2004).
- Kopelson, Karen. "Dis/integrating the gay/queer binary:" Reconstructed identity politics" for a performative pedagogy." *College English* 65.1 (2002): 17-35.
- Lafuente, Marc. "Getting looped in to the web: characterizing learning processes and educational responses," *Interactive Learning Environments*, 2016.
- Lambers, David. *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*. Cambridge U. Press, 1999.
- Lemke, Thomas. "'The birth of biopolitics': Michel Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality," *Economy and Society*, 30.2, 2001.
- Livingston, Alexander. "Excited Subject: William James and the Politics of Radical Empiricism." *Theory and Event*, 15.4 (2012).
- Lotier, Kristopher. "'Around 1986': The Externalization of Cognition and the Emergence of Postprocess Invention," *College Composition and Communication* 67:3 (2016).
- Lotier, Kristopher. "On Not Following Freire Foucault and the Critique of Human Capital," *Pedagogy*, 17:2 (2017).

- Lynch, Paul. "Composition's new thing: Bruno Latour and the apocalyptic turn." *College English* 74.5 (2012): 458-476.
- *After Pedagogy: The Experience of Teaching*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2013.
- Lynch, Paul and Rivers, Nathanial. "Comment & Response: One Train Can Hide Another." *College English* 77.6 (2015): 581.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, U. of Notre Dame Press, 1984.
- Marchetti, Sarin. *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James*. Springer, 2015.
- McCall, Leslie. "The complexity of intersectionality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30.3 (2005): 1771-1800.
- McDermott, John. "A Relational World: The Significance of the Thought of William James and John Dewey for Global Culture." *The Drama of Possibility*, Ed. Douglas Anderson. Fordham UP, 2007.
- Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in The American University*. WW Norton & Company, 2010.
- Micciche, Laura. "Writing Material." *College English* 76.6 (2014): 488-505.
- Moffett, James. "Writing, inner speech, and meditation." *College English* 44.3 (1982): 231-246.
- Newkirk, Thomas. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. Boynton/Cook, 1997.
- Olson, Gary. "Encountering the Other: Postcolonial Theory and Composition Scholarship." *JAC* 18.1 (1998).
- Pajares, Frank. "William James: Our Father Who Begat Us," In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk (Eds.), *Educational Psychology: A Century of Contributions*, 2013.
- Parser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You*. Penguin Press, 2011.
- Perry, William. *Forms Of Intellectual And Ethical Development In The College Years: A Scheme*, 1998.
- Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in America," [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org), accessed Dec. 2017.
- Phelps, Louise Wetherbee. *Composition as a Human Science: Contributions to the Understanding of a Discipline*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Harvard UP, 1992.
- Porter, John. "Developing a Postmodern Ethics of Rhetoric and Composition." *Defining the New Rhetorics*. Ed. Theresa Enos and S. Brown. Sage, 1993.

- Postman, Neil. *Techopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Vintage Books, 1993.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the contact zone." *Profession* (1991): 33-40.
- Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Rickert, Thomas. "In the house of doing: Rhetoric and the Kairos of ambience." *JAC* (2004): 901-927.
- *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Zizek, and the Return of the Subject*. U. of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.
- Roskelly, Hephzibah, and Kate Ronald. *Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism, and the Teaching of Writing*. SUNY Press, 1998.
- Rowe, Stephen. *The Vision of James*. Element, 1996.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. "When the first voice you hear is not your own." *College Composition and Communication* 47.1 (1996): 29-40.
- Santos, Terry. "Ideology in composition: L1 and ESL." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 1.1 (1992): 1-15.
- Saunders, George. "The Braindead Megaphone," *The Braindead Megaphone*, Riverhead Books, 2007.
- Schiller, F.C.S. *On Pragmatism and Humanism: Selected Writings, 1891—1939*, eds. Shook, J. and McDonald, H. Amherst, Humanity Books, 2008.
- Scott, Tony and Welch, Nancy. "One Train Can Hide Another: Critical Materialism for Public Composition," *College English*, 76:6 (2014).
- Simon, Linda. *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Sirc, Geoffrey. *English Composition as a Happening*, Utah State UP, 2002.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "William James," [plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/#3](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/#3), accessed Dec. 2017.
- Stanford History Education Group, "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning," [sheg.stanford.edu](http://sheg.stanford.edu), accessed Dec. 2017.
- Stob, Paul. *William James and the Art of Popular Statement*. MSU Press, 2013.
- Sunstein, Cass. *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton U. Press, 2007.
- Syverson, Margaret. *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*. SIU Press, 1999.
- Tingle, Nick. *Self-Development and College Writing*. SIU Press, 2004.
- Tomlinson, Barbara. "Colonizing intersectionality: Replicating racial hierarchy in feminist academic arguments." *Social Identities* 19.2 (2013): 254-272.



- Trende, Sean. "Trump, Brexit and the State of the Race," *Real Clear Politics*, pub. June 28, 2016. Accessed Dec. 2017.
- Wallace, David. "Unwelcome Stories, Identity Matters, and Strategies for Engaging in Cross-Boundary Discourses." *College English* 76.6 (2014): 545.
- Wardle, Elizabeth. "Identity, authority, and learning to write in new workplaces." *Enculturation* 5.2 (2004).
- West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. The U. of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- Williams, Bronwyn T. "Speak for yourself? Power and hybridity in the cross-cultural classroom." *College Composition and Communication* (2003): 586-609.
- Wilshire, Bruce. "The breathtaking intimacy of the material world," *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, Putnam, Ruth Anna, ed. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Yagelski, Robert. *Writing as a Way Of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*. Hampton Press, 2011.